

What Children's Literature Tells Us about Non-standard Language: The Use of *Ain't* and *Don't* in *The Water Babies*

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Abstract

児童文学作品では、登場人物にあまり好ましくない言葉や誤った文法を使わせる場合、幼い読者がそのまま習得してしまわぬよう、ときに語り手がその用法について解説を試みることがある。このような「語り」の言葉は当時の言語を研究する者にとって貴重な資料となる。本稿では、まず、児童文学の「語り」からテキストの出版当時の規範的な用法を知りうる例を示し、次に 19 世紀の児童文学 *The Water Babies* の語り手の言葉を鍵として、二つの非標準の否定形 *ain't* と *don't* (e.g. *He don't sing.*) の用いられ方の違いを検討した。その結果、19 世紀のイギリス英語において、*ain't* と *don't* はともに教養ある人によって使用されていたが、前者は感情的になって言葉が乱れる場合に使われ教養人は避けるべき表現とされていた一方、後者はその非文法的使用が比較にならないほど看過されていたことが明らかになった。本稿の結果は、登場人物の社会言語学的要因や対話の状況から分析した Nakayama (2009) の結論を補足・確認するものとなった。

Key words: children's literature, narrative, non-standard language, *the Water Babies*, *ain't*, *don't*

1. Introduction

Fantasy novels written for children are enjoyable reading not just for children themselves but even for grown-ups. They can make readers feel as if they were strolling around a strange world with the characters. Along with such thrilling excitement, fantasies sometimes give language researchers immensely interesting insight into the usage of language. Since these works originally are targeted at young readers, who are in the process of mastering their language and hence easily pick up whatever words they come across, the authors will naturally be cautious about the use of language. As a result it may happen that when they want to use vulgar language to vividly characterize people in the story, the authors may feel obliged to insert a few words in the narrative about this improper usage to prevent their young readers from innocently picking it up. These comments are valuable especially when their books were written in a past era for which the record of spoken language is extremely limited in that what is regarded as the authors' own

voice in the text can help us to understand how people at that time regarded certain words.

In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950), for instance, though it is not a very old book, the author makes a comment about the form “it is her” in the novel as seen in the underlined part below:

“Come out, Mrs. Beaver. Come out, Sons and Daughters of Adam. It’s all right! It isn’t *Her!*” This was bad grammar of course, but that is how beavers talk when they are excited; I mean, in Narnia—in our world they usually don’t talk at all (italics original; underline added). (p. 115)

In this part, the author, C. S. Lewis, is trying to tell his young readers that “It isn’t *Her!*” is not grammatically correct and that they should not use it. Although he does not mention the proper alternative expression, it is easily presumed that the grammatical form in this case is “It isn’t *She!*” His comment may sound a little strange to one who is familiar with English grammar today. Biber et al. (1999: 335), for instance, say that we find both nominative and accusative forms after forms of *be* and argue that despite a traditional prescription based on the rules of Latin grammar, accusative forms are predominant in all registers where the relevant forms are found. Here, to know what “a traditional prescription” says about the case of the pronoun after *be*, let us make a reference to Lowth (1769), which is one of the most influential grammatical books in the eighteenth century and on the basis of which many similar grammars were written thereafter. Citing a similar example “I am He” in his comments on pronoun case, Lowth argues that “[h]ere the latter Substantive is in the Nominative Case, as well as the former; and the Verb is said to govern the Nominative Case: or, the latter Substantive may be said to agree in Case with the former (p. 68).” With these observations taken together, it can be concluded that Lewis followed Lowth’s instructions in regard of the usage of case and that nominative *she* after the verb *be* was the norm at the time of publication of his novel.

Another interesting suggestion in Lewis’s comment is that Mr. Beaver does not always use the ungrammatical form but he uttered it out of excitement in that place. Then, was the creature really excited when he used the non-standard form? It might be helpful to observe the situation under which the beaver said the sentence. In this scene, Mr. and Mrs. Beavers and three children, one boy and two girls, are running away from the White Witch, who reigns over Narnia now and makes it always winter with no Christmas. After a long tiring walk, they hide themselves in a secret cave to take a rest for a while, and some hours later there is a sound of jingling bells outside. Mr. Beaver goes out of the cave to check who has come in a sledge. Finding that the rider is not the Witch (actually it is Father Christmas!), he excitedly comes back to tell them “It isn’t *Her!*” It

is only natural for him to be overjoyed in this scene and thus it would be convincing that that grammatical mistake was possibly caused by agitation of the speaker.

2. My previous study of the non-standard negatives *ain't* and *don't* and what is lacking there

As we have seen above, both the characters' speech and the author's comments in children's books are valuable to understand grammatical usage around the time when the book was written and guess how words might actually be used by people those days. In my previous study (Nakayama, 2009), I showed the similarity and difference in use between two non-standard negative forms, *ain't* and *don't* (e.g. he *don't* sing), with ten nineteenth-century novels as corpus. In this research the examples of *ain't* or *don't* are found in the dialogue of eight texts,¹⁾ and this compelled me to analyze the usage of these two non-standard forms from the perspectives of the characters' sociolinguistic status. The users of *ain't* and *don't*, who vary in social class, gender and age, show us the usage of the forms in society at that time. From the analysis of the characters' relevant speech, it was concluded that *ain't* is more vulgar than *don't* because middle-class people, who were said to be most careful about their speech at that time (Görlach, 1999: 38), use the former less frequently while comparatively more women, who are also careful about their language (cf. Labov, 1972 and Trudgill, 1983), use the latter. It was also observed that *ain't* as well as *don't* for *doesn't* is used by some upper-class people when they are emotional or talking to their family. These findings establish the difference in use between the two forms to a certain degree. However, unfortunately it was not found how the authors those days regarded the usage of the forms in any of the ten texts consulted for the study. It is *The Water Babies*, a fantasy written in the nineteenth century, which answered this question. Therefore I would like to add some new observations obtained from it concerning the usage of *ain't* and *don't* in the present paper.

3. The different usage of *ain't* and *don't* in *The Water Babies*

The Water Babies is a fantasy written for young children by Charles Kingsley in 1863. It is a story about a chimney boy who himself becomes a Water Baby and goes through various experiences in a mysterious underwater world. Before starting to discuss the usage of the two nonstandard negatives in this text, I would like to introduce the story a little more and its style as background for the following discussion.

The leading character is an orphan chimney boy, Tom, who is employed by a merciless boss, Mr. Grimes. One day while cleaning a chimney at a large house, Tom appears in the bedroom of a girl named Ellie. She mistakes him for a thief, and he runs away. During his flight he accidentally falls into a stream and becomes a Water Baby there. In his new world he encounters

all sorts of water creatures from fairies, water babies, fish, birds, and a giant to even Ellie and Mr. Grimes, both of whom also become water creatures later. The experience of hardship in his long journey to the Other-End-of-Nowhere in the mysterious world makes Tom grow physically and mentally, and he becomes a great scientist in the end. The story is told by the narrator, who can be regarded as the author himself. He narrates as if talking to his own son beside him about what is believed to have actually happened. The author addresses the supposed reader “my dear gentleman,” or “my dear little man.” Therefore the narrative style is quite close to spoken rather than written language. The target two non-standard forms *ain't* and *don't* are found both in the dialogue and the narrative of this text. Let us look how they are used there respectively.

3.1 The usage of *Ain't*

There are six instances of *ain't* in the text, out of which five are used in the dialogue and one quoted in the narrative. Let us first examine the instances found in the dialogue. Those who utter the form are two water creatures, Tom and Professor Pthmlnsptrs. These instances are shown in (1) to (5).²⁾

(1) ‘You’re dead,’ said Tom, looking at him as he stood on his knee as white as a ghost.

‘No, I *ain't*!’ answered a little squeaking voice over his head. ‘This is me up here, in my ball-dress; and that’s my skin. Ha, ha! you could not do such a trick as that!’ [The speaker: a little fellow with whom Tom became acquainted in the water] (p.65)

(2) ‘Ha, ha!’ he said, and he jerked and skipped up and down, never stopping an instant, just as if he had St Vitus’s dance.

‘*Ain't* I a pretty fellow now?’

And so he was; for his body was white, and his tail orange, and his eyes all the colours of a peacock’s tail. [The same creature as above] (p. 65)

(3) ‘Greedy we are,’ says a great fat old molly, ‘but lazy we *ain't*; and, as for lubbers, we’re no more lubbers than you. Let’s have a look at the lad.’

And he flapped right into Tom’s face, and stared at him in the most impudent way (for the mollies are audacious fellows, as all whalers know), and then asked him where he hailed from, and what land he sighted last. [An old molly: water creature] (p. 168)

(4) ‘It has actually eyes!’ he cried. ‘Why, it must be a Cephalopod! This is most extraordinary!’

‘No, I *ain't*!’ cried Tom, as loud as he could; for he did not like to be called bad names.

[Tom; chimney-sweep] (p. 98)

The dialogues with *ain't* in examples (1) to (3) are those by water creatures. The form in (1) and (2) belong to the same unnamed little one. Just as Lewis describes above, living beings in a strange land, where the grammar may not be as important as in British society at that time, seem to use “bad” grammar. It is worth mentioning that the little fellow who utters *ain't* also commits a similar grammatical mistake as Mr. Beaver in Narnia did; he says “this is me” in (1). Then, was the water creature excited as is the case of Mr. Beaver when it uttered *ain't*? Judging from the sentences “answered a little squeaking voice over his head” in (1) and “he jerked and skipped up and down, never stopping an instant” in (2), it can be presumed that in both cases at least he is not in a calm state. Example (3) is uttered by another water creature, an old molly, who wants to deny their laziness although he accepts greediness as their nature. The description “And he flapped right into Tom’s face, and stared at him in the most impudent way” denotes that he is feeling resentment.

Tom is a human boy and uses *ain't* as well as shown in example (4). It is most likely that as a chimney-sweep he has not learned standard language properly and uses this non-standard form. However, it should be noted that he does not habitually use the form. There is a case in which he uses the standard *am not* instead of *ain't* when he is trying to oppose an old female otter, who regards him as eft, as shown below.

‘I am not an eft!’ said Tom; ‘efts have tails.’ (p. 68)

The scene comes earlier than example (4). Here he seems to be a little irritated because he says ‘I am not’ instead of ‘I’m not.’ Though a grammatical form, the uncontracted negative is one way of expressing emphasis and could represent disturbed feelings. A more interesting point is the fact that in the two similar sentences he uses the standard ‘I am not’ in one and the non-standard ‘I ain’t’ in the other, and this indicates that he could be even more agitated in the latter. Let us look at both scenes in more detail. In the first case, where an old female otter mistakes him for eft, although he may be annoyed, he can control himself enough to explain the reason that he is not an eft by referring to his not having a tail. On the other hand, in the second example (4), Tom is fighting for release from the meshes thrown by the professor, who has mistaken him for a Cephalopod and is trying to catch him. The narrative words “cried Tom, as loud as he could” depict his desperate claim in this situation. Thus from these two examples it can be assumed that the latter is a more disturbing condition than the former and that the occurrence of *ain't* is closely connected with the circumstances under which the speaker is placed. It is not unusual that the

same character shifts between two kinds of language, standard and non-standard. For example, Thomas Hardy wrote in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* "Mrs. Durbeyfield still habitually spoke the dialect; her daughter, who had passed the Sixth Standard in the National School under a London-trained mistress, used it only when excited by joy, surprise, or grief (1891: 31)." The explanatory narration indicates that standard language gives way to dialect depending on the speaker's emotional condition.³⁾

The last instance of *ain't* in dialogue is (5), a slightly problematic utterance by Professor Pthmlnsprts. To have a better understanding of the situation in which he uses the form, let us extract a larger portion of narrative along with his remark.

(5) Now little Ellie was, I suppose, a stupid little girl; for, instead of being convinced by Professor Pthmlnsprts' arguments, she only asked the same question over again. 'But why are there not water-babies?'

I trust and hope that it was because the professor trod at that moment on the edge of a very sharp mussel, and hurt one of his corns sadly, that he answered quite sharply, forgetting that he was a scientific man, and therefore ought to have known that he couldn't know; and that he was a logician, and therefore ought to have known that he could not prove a universal negative--I say, I trust and hope it was because the mussel hurt his corn, that the professor answered quite sharply: 'Because there *ain't*.'

Which was not even good English, my dear little boy; for, as you must know from Aunt Agitate's Arguments, the professor ought to have said, if he was so angry as to say anything of the kind-- because there are not: or are none: or are none of them; or (if he had been reading Aunt Agitate too) because they do not exist. (p. 98)

Professor Pthmlnsprts is "a very great naturalist" and usually "a very worthy kind good-natured little old gentleman and very fond of children" (p. 94). Ellie, a lonely girl who wants friends to play with, says that she wishes there were little children in the water when she is walking along the stream with the professor. On hearing her talk about water-babies, he flatly denies their existence. He becomes irritated because although he does not believe in such beings, he cannot disprove their existence. Therefore he said just sharply 'Because there *ain't*,' and the term is followed by the author's lecture about its use as underscored in (5). From his comments, we can learn two things about the usage of the form: he strongly recommends that if you are educated, you should not use it under any circumstance since it is not "good" English; there are cases in which even educated people such as the professor use it if they are extremely upset. Furthermore, judging from the fact that he does not criticize either Tom nor water creatures for using the

nonstandard form, it would not be a problem, at least in the author's opinion, for working-class children as well as water creatures to use it.

There is another place where the narrator refers to *ain't* along with *can't*, at an earlier stage of the novel, when he tells the readers that Tom has become a water baby.

(6) 'But a water baby is contrary to nature.'

Well, but my dear little man, you must learn to talk about such things, when you grow older, in a very different way from that. You must not talk about 'ain't' and 'can't' when you speak of this great wonderful world round you, of which the wisest man knows only the very smallest corner and is, [...].

You must not say that this cannot be, or that that is contrary to nature. You do not know what Nature is, what she can do; (p.46)

In this place what the author is probably trying to say that it is not recommendable to deny what you do not truly know using "bad" language as *ain't* and *can't*, but it is no better if you deny it in "good" language.

So far we have observed the use of *ain't* in this text by focusing on what sort of characters use the form and how the author views it and found that *ain't* is substandard English, which should be avoided by the educated no matter how angry, irritated or excited. In contrast, the form is overlooked as common speech when uttered by water creatures and working-class boys such as Tom. The novel also reports that these characters tend to utter the form when agitated on the whole. Next, I would like to discuss how *don't* for *doesn't* or *does not* is used in the text.

3.2 The usage of *don't*

First of all let us be clear about what was said concerning the use of *don't* in the nineteenth century. As I pointed out in my previous paper, just as in the case of *ain't* not many grammarians refer to its usage in their grammar books including Lowth (1769), Murray (1806), and Cobbett (1819). One possible explanation for this fact is that many of the grammarians at that time did not bother to mention it because the usage was indisputably ungrammatical. However in spite of its incorrect usage, it is also true that in the century some noble people used it in their letters (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2006: 260) and it was common for educated people to use *don't* instead of *doesn't* or *does not* (Brown 1851: 373). My previous research also shows that people in the upper and middle classes used *don't* and that they used it much more casually than *ain't*.

There are three examples of the non-standard usage in *the Water Babies* and all of them belong to the narrative rather than dialogue. This means that the narrator himself uses this

ungrammatical form. There is not a single example of *doesn't* anywhere in the text but are 11 occurrences of *does not*, which are all found in the narrative. Therefore here we have no data to reveal whether the characters in the story use the third person singular present form grammatically or not. Anyhow the result is rather an unexpected one, which we will discuss below. The three examples of *don't* in the narrative are as follows:

- (7) Though really, after all, it *don't* much matter; because--as Lord Dundreary and others would put it--nobody but men have hippopotamuses in their brains; so, if a hippopotamus was discovered in an ape's brain, why it would not be one, you know, but something else. (p. 96)
- (8) Till then, they must comfort themselves with the thought, that the longer their ears are, the thicker their hides; and so a good beating *don't* hurt them. (p. 188)
- (9) So Tom went home with Ellie on Sundays, and sometimes on week-days, too; and he is now a great man of science, and can plan railroads, and steam-engines, and electric telegraphs, and rifled guns, and so forth; and knows everything about everything, except why a hen's egg *don't* turn into a crocodile, and two or three other little things which no one will know till the coming of the Cocqcigrues. (p. 212)

The most controversial point here would be about whether this use of *don't* for *doesn't* by the author is due to his style of narrative or simply a careless grammatical mistake.⁴⁾ Let us consider how this could have happened.

Generally the language in narrative is more of a written style compared to the dialogue. However, as mentioned earlier the narrative of *The Water Babies* is written in a talking style. In order to judge how colloquial the narrative is, it might be reasonable to examine the ratio of the contracted form, which is usually avoided in written language. Cobbett (1819), a major nineteenth-century grammarian, for instance states as follows:

149. The *Apostrophe*, or mark of *elision*, is a comma, placed above line, thus [']. Elision means a *cutting off*; and this mark is used for that purpose: as *don't*, for *do not*; *tho'*, for *though*; *lov'd*, for *loved*. I have mentioned this mark, because it is used properly enough in *poetry*; but, I beg you never to use it in prose in one single instance during your whole life. It ought to be called the mark not of *elision*, but of *laziness* and *vulgarity*. (p. 217)

Now to find out how colloquial the narrative in *The Water Babies* is, we will take a look at the

ratio of *do not* and *don't*, in the narrative and dialogue in the text.⁵⁾

Table 1. *do not* / *don't* in narrative and dialogue

	do not	don't	Total
narrative	15 (38.5%)	24 (61.5%)	39
dialogue	9 (14.5%)	53 (85.5%)	62

As Table 1 indicates the proportion of *don't* in the narrative is 61.5 % , which is of course lower than in the dialogue (85.5%) but still high enough to show that the narrative part of this text is written in a conversational style.

That Kingsley uses the ungrammatical *don't* agrees with Brown's description that educated people use *don't* for *doesn't*. Of course it is fully understandable that the author of *The Water Babies* used the colloquial but standard contracted negative *don't* in the narrative, which would probably have felt more natural for him. It might also be possible that the narrator is adopting a faux-naif tone – pretending to be rather unsophisticated – by employing the colloquial non-standard *don't*, and if that is the case, the use of *don't* might be stylistically appropriate. Nevertheless, there still remains some question. Would Kingsley have thought that using *don't* instead of *doesn't* was acceptable even in a book for children? We have already found that Kingsley or the narrator is very concerned about the grammatical usage in this book through his description of the usage of *ain't*. His advice for young readers to avoid the form is persistent. Therefore it cannot be easily assumed that the same grammar-bound person accepted the *don't* form with third person singular subject, which is no less a grammatical error than *ain't*. The author may have employed the non-standard *don't* in private letters or diaries, but probably not in material for publication, just as the ten novelists in my previous study; none of them uses the form in the narrative whatever style it is.

Another possible assumption is that he might have unintentionally used *don't*, and if so, his case teaches us that even a grammatically rigid writer like him committed a mistake regarding the use of *don't* and more importantly this tells us that the ungrammatical usage of *don't* was quite easily overlooked at that time. There seem to be some morphological reason why *doesn't* tends to be replaced by *don't* relatively easily compared to *ain't*. It is probably because *don't* cannot be recognized as mistaken usage only by looking at the form. In the case of *ain't*, you can tell that it is non-standard the moment you see its form. In the narrative, where the standard *don't* is frequently used, the non-standard *don't* could submerge among its many standard counterparts. The kinds of subjects involved may have something to do with this matter as well. Although the data is extremely limited, it may be worth noting that in all the three non-standard examples by

the narrator, the subject of the predicate is other than a person; they are “it,” “a good beating,” and “a hen’s egg” respectively, while all the five personal subjects, “every one,” “each of us,” “Mr. Garth,” “the Fairy⁶,” and “he,” properly occur with *does not*. In other words the non-standard *don’t* is more easily overlooked in the case of impersonal subject than its personal counterpart for some reason.

Whatever reasons might lie behind, the examples of the non-standard *don’t* form in *The Water Babies* show that the use of *don’t* for *doesn’t* actually happened among the educated, and that is a quite different usage from how *ain’t* was used. Although it would be almost impossible now to confirm whether Kingsley’s use of the non-standard form is due to his colloquial style or careless mistake, it could be safely said that *don’t* is a much more acceptable and far less conspicuous ungrammatical usage than *ain’t*.

4. Conclusion

The present paper was intended to show how children’s books can be a valuable resource to understand the usage of language in a particular historical context. It is demonstrated that in both *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and *The Water Babies*, one authorial concern is to teach their young readers about the “bad” language used by their characters so that they will not innocently pick it up. In this way, the narrator’s remarks can usefully help us to learn how nonstandard forms were regarded when the text was written.

Concerning the two nonstandard negative forms *ain’t* and *don’t*, which were the variants researched in my previous paper (Nakayama 2009), the narrator’s comments as well as those of the characters in *The Water Babies* confirmed and supplemented the findings in that paper by providing a clearer and more subtle discrimination between the use of the two forms. It now seems probable that these ungrammatical forms are both employed by educated people but in quite different ways; the former is uttered when they have lost their emotional control to such an extent that their correctness of speech is affected, and the latter when they are simply talking casually. Moreover, as to the use of *ain’t*, lower class speakers (and some creatures in strange lands), like the educated, tend to use it when they are extremely agitated.

Notes

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- 1) These eight nineteenth-century novels are *Vanity Fair* (1847-48) by W. M. Thackeray, *Barchester Towers* (1857) by Anthony Trollope, *Great Expectations* (1861) by Charles Dickens, *Silas Marner* (1861) by George Eliot, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass* (1865 and 1872) by

Lewis Carroll, *Treasure Island* (1883) by Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) by Oscar Wilde, and *Jude the Obscure* (1895) by Thomas Hardy. The other two with no relevant instances are *Jane Eyre* (1847) by Charlotte Brontë and *Wuthering Heights* (1847) by Emily Brontë.

- 2) Hereafter emphases such as italics and underline in the quotations in this paper are all mine.
- 3) Hardy changed the underlined part for the 1912 edition into “spoke two languages; the dialect at home, more or less; ordinary English abroad and to persons of quality (p. 21).” The reason why he revised this part is not clear and critics have different ideas about it, but I will not pursue this question in detail as it is not the concern of the topic of the present paper.
- 4) Denison (1998: 163) reports that there are no examples of subjunctive *do* after c. 1740. It follows that the instances of *don't* with third person singular subject in this nineteenth century text should not be construed as such.
- 5) The relevant examples were collected regardless of grammatical correctness.
- 6) Since “the Fairy” is replaced with the pronoun *she*, it is regarded as person here.

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