Names and character diversity in Dutch children's literature

Dutch parents name their children according to name preferences shared by others from their socio-economic, cultural, linguistic or ethnic group (Bloothooft & Onland 2011). As a result, popular names can be attributed to specific name groups – 14 clusters of names that co-occur above chance within families or within groups that share the same level of education, income, ethnicity etc. (Bloothooft & Groot 2008). The study of these patterns in naming practices thus contributes to our understanding of cultural distinction and the social construction of group identities (e.g. Leys 1974; Desplanques 1986).

Representation and the construction of group identities have also been a main topic of interest among literary scholars. Recent research on character diversity in Dutch literature shows that the representation of social groups in the contemporary Dutch novel is relatively homogeneous compared to the composition of the present Dutch society (Van der Deijl et. al 2016). These findings raise new questions on the extent in which the experience, identity and preferences of authors structurally shape the fictional world. Such questions are especially relevant to children's literature, a genre that has been studied and criticized extensively for its depiction of the extra-literary world or the inclusiveness of its intended audience (Joosen & Van Lierop-Debrauwer 2014, Van Lierop-Debrauwer 2013).

Whereas literary names are usually studied as a stylistic phenomenon or as an aspect of a character's representation (Van Dalen-Oskam 2009, 2013), this project quantitatively examines character names in order to show whether the representation of social-cultural domains in children's literature at large compares to the distribution of these domains in the Dutch society. If so, children's literature as a whole would provide a representative selection of the diversity of identities present in the extra-literary world, the actual society.

Because first names may signal social group membership, the distribution of names of characters in modern children's books has been compared to the distribution of contemporary first names of children in society. To this end, the first names, the character representation and the age group of intended readers of 538 Dutch children's books (www.kjoek.nl), as an estimated 20% sample of all children's books published between 2011-2016, were collected. With the exception of rare or fantasy names (15%), each name was associated to one of 14 name groups. The distribution of names across name groups was compared to the same type of distribution derived from the first names of all 3.1 million Dutch children who were between 2 and 18 years of age in 2016.

Results show a close correspondence between both name distributions, which indicates that children's literature fairly represents not only the names of children in society, but also its social-cultural and ethnic composition. These findings suggest a difference with adult literature, and puts the ongoing debates on literary diversity and representation in a new perspective (e.g. Rouw 2015; Amatmoekrim 2015; Loontjes 2016).

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