Time across the page: narrative rhythm, repetition and temporal discontinuity in two children's picturebooks

El tiempo en las páginas: ritmo narrativo, repetición y discontinuidad temporal en dos libros ilustrados infantiles

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Abstract: This article examines how narrative time is organised across verbal and visual sequences in Luís Silva's O Livro da Avó (2010) and Britta Teckentrup's A Árvore das Recordações (2018). Moving away from thematic readings of death and remembrance, it asks how the picturebook's successive openings regulate the reader's access to events, differentiate habitual from singular time, and coordinate remembered episodes with narrative progression. A qualitative comparative close reading uses the double-page opening and the transition between openings as analytical units, distinguishing order, duration, frequency, temporal framing and verbal–visual coordination. Silva's retrospective narrative establishes habitual cycles of departure and return before a singular return interrupts them; an uncaptioned seascape and an explicit leap of many years then redistribute narrative duration. Teckentrup's account coordinates the present gathering of animals with recollected encounters and the gradual passage of time. The comparison suggests that temporal meaning in these picturebooks arises not merely from tense or represented chronology but from the material sequencing of openings, shifts in narrative frequency and the alternation of event and interval. The study analyses textual affordances, not observed responses of child readers.

Keywords: Picturebooks. Narrative Time. Narrative Frequency. Page Turn. Temporal Ellipsis. Multimodal Narratology.

Resumen: Este artículo examina cómo se organiza el tiempo narrativo a través de secuencias verbales y visuales en O Livro da Avó (2010), de Luís Silva, y A Árvore das Recordações (2018), de Britta Teckentrup. Más allá de las lecturas temáticas de la muerte y el recuerdo, analiza cómo la sucesión de aperturas de doble página regula el acceso a los acontecimientos, distingue el tiempo habitual del singular y articula los episodios recordados con la progresión narrativa. Mediante una lectura comparativa cualitativa, se utilizan como unidades de análisis las aperturas de doble página y las transiciones entre ellas, atendiendo al orden, la duración, la frecuencia, el encuadre temporal (temporal framing) y la coordinación verbo-visual. En Silva, los ciclos habituales de salida y regreso se interrumpen con un regreso singular; una escena marina sin narración verbal y un salto explícito de muchos años redistribuyen después la duración narrativa. En Teckentrup, la reunión presente de los animales se articula con encuentros recordados y con el paso gradual del tiempo. La comparación indica que el significado temporal depende no solo del tiempo verbal o de la cronología representada, sino también de la secuencia material de aperturas, los cambios de frecuencia narrativa y la alternancia entre acontecimiento e

intervalo. El estudio examina las posibilidades interpretativas de los textos, no las respuestas observadas de lectores infantiles.

Palabras clave: Álbum Ilustrado. Tiempo Narrativo. Frecuencia Narrativa. Paso de Página. Elipsis Temporal. Narratología Multimodal.

1. Introduction

The temporal structure of a picturebook is both narrative and material. Readers infer a chronology of events, but encounter that chronology in an authored sequence of openings. Words can announce a lapse of years in a single sentence; images can occupy an entire opening without indicating a measurable duration. A page turn, meanwhile, withholds the next configuration until the reader moves physically through the book. The coexistence of these temporal resources warrants an analysis distinct from the familiar question of what an image symbolises.

This study asks how two picturebooks coordinate temporal order, duration and frequency through verbal statements, images and transitions between openings. The corpus consists of O Livro da Avó by Luís Silva and A Árvore das Recordações by Britta Teckentrup. Both works address death, yet their relevance here lies in their different ways of constructing a temporal discourse: a first-person account of recollection in Silva and a narrated sequence of communal remembrance in Teckentrup. The argument concerns formal operations rather than the educational effectiveness of either book or children's actual interpretations.

The same primary works may support distinct studies, but a change in vocabulary alone does not establish a new contribution. Accordingly, this analysis brackets iconographic interpretation and continuing-bonds theory. Its evidence is the succession of openings, the verbal markers of event frequency and elapsed time, and the arrangement of retrospection within the unfolding discourse.

2. Narrative time and the picturebook opening

Genette's (1980) distinctions between order, duration and frequency provide an operational starting point. Order concerns the relation between the inferred chronology and the sequence in which events are told. Duration concerns the relative extent of narrated events and their discursive treatment; it should not be equated mechanically with the number of words or pages. Frequency concerns how often an event occurs in the story and how often it is narrated: a single telling may summarise an action performed repeatedly, whereas a single event may be recalled more than once.

These distinctions require adaptation to the picturebook. In a verbal narrative, discourse may be approximated by the progression of sentences; in a picturebook, the opening simultaneously offers an image and verbal text, while the turn to the next opening introduces a sequential boundary. As Nikolajeva and Scott (2001) demonstrate, picturebook interpretation depends on the interaction of the two modes. Here that interaction is examined specifically for temporal information: whether words locate events, whether images depict a punctual scene or imply a longer interval, and whether the next opening changes the temporal frame. Research on the material and sequential design of picturebooks provides a more specific point of comparison. Sipe and Brightman (2009) demonstrate that readers can infer elapsed time and intervening actions across page breaks, although their study concerns observed classroom responses rather than the formal analysis undertaken here. Gressnich (2012) examines verbal and visual pageturners as devices for distributing information across successive openings. Santiago Ruiz (2021) conceptualises sequentiality and the gaps between units as constitutive dimensions of picturebook meaning. Together, these studies establish that the turn and the gap are analytically consequential; the present comparison extends that discussion by tracking how frequency,

verbal–visual allocation and the order of disclosure interact in two distinct representations of remembered time.

Three temporal layers are distinguished: story chronology (the reconstructed order of represented events), discourse sequence (the order and extent of their presentation) and reading sequence (the material progression from opening to opening). The third is not a claim about measurable reading speed; no eye-tracking or reader-response data were collected. It identifies only the order in which the printed object makes information available.

3. Materials and method

The analysis concerns Silva's second Portuguese edition (Edições Afrontamento, July 2010; first edition November 2007) and Teckentrup's Portuguese edition (Edicare, 2018; translation credited to Catarina Florindo). Both were examined through sequential photographs of their openings and paratextual material. In Silva's case, the photographic record includes the title and opening recollections, embedded stories, the repeated departures and returns, the singular interruption, a wordless seascape, the adult retrospective frame and the closing verbal reprise. The record for Teckentrup includes the story sequence and ending. Photographic records were used to establish order rather than to claim exact pagination: the photographed copies do not consistently display printed page numbers. The corpus was selected purposively on two complementary grounds: the works share the subject of bereavement and remembrance, allowing a meaningful thematic point of comparison, yet organise temporal access in markedly different ways. Silva foregrounds a retrospectively situated first-person voice and the contrast between repeated visits and a singular absence; Teckentrup distributes recollection among several characters within a forward-moving communal frame. This contrast makes it possible to compare temporal operations rather than treating thematic similarity as sufficient evidence of formal equivalence.

The double-page opening and the transition to the next opening are the units of analysis. Each is examined for (a) temporal frame, (b) explicit time expression, (c) singular or iterative narration, (d) inferred duration, (e) retrospective insertion or chronological advance, and (f) information disclosed by the turn. Since the consulted editions do not consistently print page numbers, the analysis identifies focal openings by distinctive verbal incipits and visual descriptions, in their narrative order. In Silva, these include the paired departure and return formulas, the exceptional return, the wordless seascape, the explicit passage of years, and the final reprise. In Teckentrup, the focal sequence runs from the animals' shared recollections to the explicit passage of days, weeks and months and the changing tree. These locators describe the observed sequences without assigning unverified page or opening numbers.

This is an interpretative close reading of two purposefully selected literary artefacts, not a representative sample of picturebooks or an experiment with child participants. The comparative aim is to identify contrasting narrative procedures and the analytical usefulness of distinguishing frequency from duration. The study therefore does not claim statistical representativeness; its contribution is an explicit comparison of narrative frequency, verbal–visual distribution of temporal information, and the sequential disclosure of content through successive openings. The purposive selection follows two complementary criteria: a shared concern with death and remembrance, which holds the

broad narrative situation in common, and a marked formal contrast between Silva's first-person retrospective account, with its iterative departures and singular interruption, and Teckentrup's communal sequence of recollections embedded in a forward-moving frame. The comparison therefore tests the portability of the same temporal categories across unlike verbal–visual designs, rather than claiming representativeness.

4. Findings: O Livro da Avó

4.1. Retrospection and nested pasts

Silva's opening places the narrated relationship in retrospect: "A minha avó disse-me um dia" introduces a remembered utterance. The next opening extends the act of recollection through "Lembro-me muito bem desse momento", explicitly distinguishing the narrated scene from the later voice that remembers it. The subsequent account moves still further back: the grandmother, when young, lived in Africa, and told stories of a time when the narrator's mother was a child. The temporal organisation is therefore layered rather than simply linear: the narrator recalls the grandmother, who herself recounted an earlier generation's childhood.

The leopard episode temporarily gives one of those inherited stories the space of two consecutive openings. Its first opening introduces the man's encounter with a leopard; the next reports the outcome of a struggle. The turn between them separates the initiating event from its resolution, momentarily replacing the broad temporal summary of family history with a compact episode. This is a change in discursive scale, not evidence that the episode occupied a particular amount of clock time.

4.2. Habitual time as a narrative pattern

The book then moves through contrasting recollections of the grandmother's everyday conduct. The text "A minha avó nem sempre era amável..." is followed by "Noutras ocasiões beijávamo-nos", shifting from a general characterisation to recurring affectionate encounters. Neither formulation establishes a dated incident. Both construct a remembered pattern whose duration exceeds the moment shown in the adjacent illustration.

A more explicit iterative structure begins with "De cada vez que eu saía de casa dela" and continues on the following opening with "E de cada vez que voltava...". The paired expressions organise departure and return as repeated actions. Crucially, the two successive openings do not necessarily depict a single journey out and back: the verbal formula presents a class of visits, compressing many possible occasions into one narrated cycle. The page turn supplies the second half of that cycle, so that sequential reading momentarily reproduces its alternation.

4.3. A singular event interrupts repetition

The opening following the paired return formula changes narrative frequency decisively: "Uma vez voltei e ela não estava lá!!". "Uma vez" replaces the preceding "de cada vez". The narrative no longer reports what normally happened but singles out an exceptional return. The illustration of the closed shutters accompanies this break in expectation. The temporal contrast is therefore grounded in the verbal sequence as well as its visual placement, without requiring the shutters to carry a fixed symbolic meaning.

Immediately after the exceptional return, an opening without verbal narration presents an expanse of water. The following opening begins 'Muitos anos passaram' and

shows a figure seated at a desk in a dark interior. These consecutive, visually and verbally identifiable openings distinguish an unmeasured silent interval from an explicitly narrated passage of years; neither the image nor the act of turning the page specifies a measurable duration.

4.4. The ending reorders the opening retrospectively

The final verbal opening, “fazes-me falta!”, returns to the phrase introduced in the grandmother’s early speech, but now as the narrator’s own address. This recurrence is best described as a discursive reprise: the same formulation is encountered at two distinct positions in the sequence, with different speakers and temporal situations. The end does not simply return the story to its chronological beginning. It invites the reader to relate the present utterance to an earlier narrated moment after the intervening years have been disclosed. The book thus closes through a backward textual connection while remaining in the narrator’s later present.

5. Findings: A Árvore das Recordações

5.1. A forward-moving frame with retrospective insertions

Teckentrup’s narrative differs from Silva’s first-person retrospect. The account establishes the fox’s death and follows the animals as they gather and share recollections of experiences with him. The animals’ gathering supplies an advancing narrative frame, while the remembered encounters refer to events prior to that frame. The temporal contrast is not between a narrator’s childhood and adulthood but between the present act of recollecting and multiple earlier episodes evoked by different participants.

The remembered episodes do not form a complete chronology of the fox’s life. Their ordering is determined by the successive acts of telling rather than by the dates on which the experiences occurred. In narratological terms, the retrospective insertions enrich the current narrative moment without supplying a recoverable continuous life history. Their function in the temporal analysis is to alternate the time of telling with the time of what is told.

5.2. Accumulation and represented duration

After the openings in which the animals recount encounters with the fox, the narration explicitly marks the passage of ‘dias, semanas e meses seguintes’. Across the ensuing visual sequence, the tree grows and becomes increasingly prominent. The duration is therefore communicated jointly through a verbal temporal marker and changing images, rather than by the illustrations alone. The tree is treated here as a recurring visual indicator of change, without presuming a single symbolic interpretation.

This differs from Silva’s compact announcement, “Muitos anos passaram”. Teckentrup distributes temporal progression across narrated recollections, an explicit reference to days, weeks and months, and changing visual states; Silva announces a much longer interval in a short verbal summary after an uncaptioned opening. The contrast concerns how time is distributed across words and images, not the emotional effectiveness of either book.

5.3. Narrative pacing without clock time

The alternation between individual recollections and the gathering scene distributes attention across episodes whose narrated durations cannot be measured uniformly. The telling of a memory may occupy an opening even when the remembered event itself is short; the subsequent development of the setting can imply an extended period with comparatively little verbal elaboration. Page allocation and story duration are therefore not proportional. The narrative uses successive openings to make a longer process perceptible through stages rather than through a single quantified temporal statement.

6. Comparison: four temporal operations

6.1. Temporal anchors and narrated remembrance

The works are not equivalent instances of retrospection. In Silva, the narrative voice explicitly occupies a later position and revisits childhood from that distance. In Teckentrup, the narrated sequence is organised around a collective response to the fox's death and the subsequent circulation of remembered experiences. A memory narrated by a character does not automatically turn the entire work into a retrospective first-person narrative. The analytical distinction matters: one text embeds recollection within an adult narrator's return to childhood, while the other distributes recollection among characters within a continuing narrative present.

6.2. Duration and the representation of change

Duration is neither identical with the number of openings nor reducible to verbal tense. Silva can summarize a series of visits in one iterative sentence and then devote a separate opening to a single exception. The narrated time represented by each opening is therefore radically uneven. In Teckentrup, the remembered anecdotes and the gradual growth of the tree provide different temporal scales: individual past moments are articulated alongside an ongoing transformation. This juxtaposition makes long-term change legible without requiring a dated calendar. In neither book can the analyst legitimately assign seconds or minutes to a page turn without observing readers.

6.3. The page turn as a relation, not an isolated device

The temporal significance of an opening depends on its place in the sequence. In Silva, the closed shutters follow the recurring departures and returns, while the uncaptioned image of water intervenes before "Muitos anos passaram". In Teckentrup, individual memories are followed by a verbal indication of days, weeks and months and by successive images of the growing tree. These details distinguish the time represented in the story from the order in which readers encounter it. A still image does not, on its own, establish either a pause in story time or a fixed reading duration.

First, the two works establish different temporal anchors. Silva begins with a remembering voice whose distance from the remembered scenes becomes explicit at the end. Teckentrup begins from a narrated present in which several characters look backward. Second, the dominant movement of retrospection differs: Silva nests a grandmother's earlier stories within the narrator's own recollection; Teckentrup inserts several remembered encounters into a shared ongoing event.

Third, Silva makes narrative frequency structurally decisive. The paired “de cada vez” expressions create an iterative rule, and “uma vez” immediately suspends it. Teckentrup instead coordinates a series of individual recollections with cumulative forward movement. Fourth, the works use different devices for extended duration: a verbally declared ellipsis (“Muitos anos passaram”) in Silva and successive visual states in Teckentrup. These distinctions concern how narrative information is ordered and distributed, not what the images represent symbolically.

The material turn of the page matters differently in each case. In Silva, consecutive openings make the departure/return pattern readable before exposing the exceptional return; a later turn brings the reader from an uncaptioned seascape to an explicit statement of elapsed years. In Teckentrup, the succession of openings permits the recognition of cumulative changes while preserving the distinction between the time of remembering and the earlier episodes remembered. A claim about the psychological effect of those turns would require separate reader research.

6.4. A comparative matrix of temporal cues

The two narratives can be distinguished along three dimensions. In temporal order, Silva’s first-person narration contains recollections of childhood, the grandmother’s earlier life and an embedded adventure, whereas Teckentrup embeds memories of the fox within the forward progression of a communal gathering. In frequency, Silva explicitly contrasts repeated visits with a single exceptional return, whereas Teckentrup’s sequence is organised around successive singular acts of remembering. In duration, Silva juxtaposes a compressed habitual period, an unmeasured wordless interval and an explicit multi-year leap; Teckentrup makes extended duration legible through cumulative changes in the growing tree. These distinctions describe observable compositional choices rather than putative psychological responses.

6.5. Temporality, focalisation and the work of the reader

An important asymmetry concerns who can know the elapsed time. Silva’s narrator speaks from a later position and can summarise a childhood retrospectively. The reader receives that distance only in stages, culminating in the explicit declaration that many years have passed. Teckentrup’s narrator, by contrast, follows a shared scene and a developing environment. Readers must infer the relation between the relatively brief duration of individual narrated memories and the much longer interval indexed by the tree’s growth. In both cases, the material succession of openings creates an interpretative task: readers connect temporally discontinuous scenes, but the nature of the missing interval differs.

Picturebook scholarship has long treated word–image relations as constitutive rather than supplementary (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2001). The present analysis adds a narrower claim: temporal meaning is produced not only within individual verbal–visual pairings but also across their ordering and unequal narrative durations. This concern is compatible with the broader multimodal and narratological perspectives assembled in Kümmerling-Meibauer’s (2018) handbook, while the categories of order, duration and frequency remain operationally indebted to Genette (1980). The present comparison builds on this understanding of the picturebook as an integrated verbal–visual form, but isolates the temporal effects of opening-to-opening sequencing as a specific analytical problem. The contribution is methodological rather than a claim that narrative time or word–image

interaction has not previously been studied. This claim is deliberately narrower than the empirical account of page-break inference offered by Sipe and Brightman (2009), and more specifically temporal than typologies of pageturners (Gressnich, 2012) or general theories of sequentiality (Santiago Ruiz, 2021).

7. Discussion

7.1. Analytical consequences

This comparison suggests a reproducible protocol for future close readings: identify the dominant temporal frame of each opening; distinguish explicitly signalled temporal transitions from inferred ones; code frequency markers independently of event duration; and examine whether a page turn maintains, interrupts, or retrospectively reinterprets an established pattern. The protocol is deliberately modest. It does not turn qualitative literary interpretation into a claim of inter-rater reliability, and it does not assume that all readers experience suspense or silence in the same way. It instead makes the grounds of interpretation inspectable.

7.2. Scope of the comparison

The two books have different verbal economies, narrating positions and image sequences. Their shared treatment of remembrance does not justify collapsing them into a single model of mourning. What makes the comparison productive is the formal asymmetry: Silva's decisive transformation lies in a change of narrative frequency and a final reversal of address, whereas Teckentrup's lies in the cumulative coexistence of recalled episodes and a continuing visible process. These are interpretive findings about the artefacts. Any claims about their educational effectiveness or about children's actual responses would require a separate empirical study.

8. Limitations and conclusion

This study is limited to two works and to the Portuguese editions identified above. It analyses narrative and visual organisation, not observed reading behaviour, emotional outcomes or pedagogical impact. Where printed pagination is absent, distinctive verbal incipits, visual content and the order of successive openings serve as locators; the analysis does not assign unverified page numbers. Translation may affect temporal expressions in Teckentrup's Portuguese edition, so conclusions about those expressions are edition-specific.

The comparison identifies two distinct temporal designs. O Livro da Avó moves from nested retrospective episodes through habitual departures and returns to a singular interruption, an ellipsis and a closing reprise. A Árvore das Recordações coordinates a forward-moving gathering with earlier episodes and conveys extended duration through successive changes. Together, they demonstrate that the picturebook's temporal architecture is produced through the relation between narrative frequency, the distribution of verbal and visual information and the sequence in which the material book reveals it.

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