



A Semantic Analysis of Referential and Contextual Meaning in The “Tortoise and the Hare”: Rob John

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Abstract

This study investigates referential and contextual meaning in The Tortoise and the Hare by Rob John through a qualitative semantic approach grounded in textual analysis and narrative interpretation. The research aims to examine how literal lexical references interact with contextual and symbolic meanings in constructing the moral discourse of the narrative. The primary data source consisted of lexical units, narrative events, and dialogues extracted from the fable, while the analytical framework was derived from semantic theories concerning referential meaning, contextual meaning, and discourse interpretation. The findings reveal that referential meaning appears through concrete lexical expressions associated with identifiable entities, actions, and spatial structures, whereas contextual meaning emerges through behavioral representation, symbolic interaction, and inferential interpretation embedded within the narrative sequence. The study also demonstrates that semantic interpretation in literary texts depends on the interrelation between denotative reference and contextual symbolism, enabling readers to derive ethical and pedagogical implications from seemingly simple narrative forms. The analysis confirms that semantic interpretation functions not merely as lexical decoding but as a multilayered interpretive process shaped by narrative context, symbolic structure, and reader cognition.

Keywords: Contextual Meaning, Fable, Narrative Semantics, Referential Meaning, Semantic Interpretation.



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INTRODUCTION

The contemporary development of semantic studies has undergone a substantial epistemological expansion in response to the growing recognition that meaning is not merely encoded in lexical forms but is dynamically negotiated through contextual, cultural, cognitive, and narrative structures across various modes of communication. Recent debates in semantics increasingly emphasize the inadequacy of purely denotational approaches for explaining how language users interpret implicit intentions, symbolic representations, and contextual inferences embedded in literary and communicative practices, particularly within texts intended for pedagogical and moral transmission. Schlenker (2018) argues that modern semantic inquiry has progressively shifted toward “super semantics,” a framework that attempts to integrate formal semantic structures with broader pragmatic and inferential mechanisms, revealing that meaning construction inevitably exceeds literal referentiality and enters the domain of contextual interpretation. Similar tendencies emerge in lexical semantic typology, where semantic shifts are understood as culturally and cognitively conditioned phenomena rather than static linguistic correspondences, demonstrating that semantic interpretation is fundamentally relational and context-sensitive (Zalizniak et al., 2012). Parallel developments within child-language interpretation studies further confirm that readers, particularly young learners, rely heavily on contextual enrichment processes in order to infer unstated meanings and aspectual implications from seemingly simple linguistic expressions (Papafragou, 2006). This global trajectory has consequently positioned semantic analysis not only as a linguistic enterprise concerned with lexical reference but also as an interdisciplinary analytical framework through which literary texts, moral narratives, and symbolic representations can be examined as complex sites of meaning production.

Existing scholarship has produced significant insights into the interaction between language, narrative symbolism, and interpretive structures, particularly in studies addressing children’s literature, translation, narratology, and multimodal discourse. Nord (2003), for instance, demonstrates that proper names in children’s literature frequently function beyond referential labeling because they carry contextual and cultural implications that shape readers’ perception of characterization and morality,

indicating that semantic interpretation in literary texts operates simultaneously at literal and associative levels. Similar observations are reinforced by Narančić Kovač (2019), whose investigation into illustrations in translated children's classics reveals that narrative meaning is not solely embedded in textual units but emerges through contextual interaction between visual representation, symbolic construction, and reader interpretation. In narratological discourse, Schärfe (2007) contends that narrative structures inherently rely upon layered semantic organization in which events, characters, and actions acquire significance through relational positioning rather than isolated lexical reference, making literary texts particularly productive objects for semantic inquiry. Research within sign language linguistics has likewise contributed to broader semantic theory by demonstrating that contextual meaning is deeply shaped by spatial relations, discourse organization, and interactional environments, rather than by lexical forms alone (De Beuzeville et al., 2009; Johnston, 2019). Even algorithmic and computational reinterpretations of "The Tortoise and the Hare," such as the compositional model proposed by Danvy (2023), illustrate how the fable continues to function as a conceptual framework for examining sequential logic, symbolic progression, and interpretive abstraction across disciplines. Collectively, these studies indicate that meaning in narrative discourse cannot be reduced to literal lexical correspondence because interpretive processes are fundamentally mediated by context, symbolism, and reader cognition.

Despite the richness of previous semantic scholarship, the existing literature reveals a persistent fragmentation between studies focusing on referential meaning and those examining contextual interpretation, resulting in a conceptual gap regarding how both dimensions interact simultaneously within literary narratives, particularly in fables designed for educational purposes. Much of the contemporary semantic literature remains heavily oriented toward formal semantics, pragmatic inference, translation equivalence, or multimodal representation, while comparatively limited attention has been devoted to examining how literal lexical references and contextual symbolism operate dialectically within short moral narratives accessible to language learners. Papafragou (2006), for example, investigates contextual inferencing in child language comprehension but does not address how referential structures within narratives contribute to interpretive development. Schlenker's (2018) theoretical expansion of semantic interpretation provides a sophisticated philosophical framework, yet it remains relatively detached from close textual analyses of pedagogical literary forms. Studies in narrative translation and visual adaptation similarly privilege cultural transfer and semiotic mediation without systematically identifying how referential lexical items interact with implied contextual meanings to produce moral interpretation (Nord, 2003; Narančić Kovač, 2019). Even broader lexical-semantic typologies, while valuable for documenting semantic shifts across languages and cultures, tend to prioritize macro-level semantic transformation over micro-level literary interpretation within specific narrative units (Zalizniak et al., 2012). This fragmentation has created an unresolved analytical problem in semantic studies because the relationship between explicit lexical reference and implicit contextual meaning in educational fables remains under-theorized, particularly in relation to how readers derive moral cognition from deceptively simple narrative structures.

The absence of integrative analyses examining referential and contextual meaning simultaneously becomes increasingly significant when considering the pedagogical function of fables in contemporary language education and literary literacy development. Educational systems worldwide continue to employ short narratives such as "The Tortoise and the Hare" because their simplicity enables vocabulary acquisition while their symbolic structure encourages moral reasoning and critical interpretation; however, pedagogical practices often emphasize surface comprehension rather than semantic depth, limiting students' capacity to engage critically with implied meanings embedded in narrative discourse. Such limitations become problematic in the context of modern literacy education, where interpretive competence increasingly requires the ability to navigate layered meanings, symbolic associations, and contextual inferences across texts and communicative environments. Research in semantic cognition suggests that learners interpret narratives not merely through lexical decoding but through contextual reconstruction processes shaped by prior knowledge, symbolic mapping, and inferential reasoning (Papafragou, 2006). The inability to systematically distinguish referential meaning from contextual meaning may consequently hinder students' interpretive development because literal understanding alone cannot fully explain how narratives communicate ethical values, social criticism, or behavioral models. The urgency of addressing this issue is intensified by the growing demand for interdisciplinary approaches in language education capable of integrating semantics, literary

interpretation, and character education within a coherent analytical framework. Semantic analysis of fables therefore possesses not only theoretical relevance for linguistic inquiry but also practical significance for pedagogical methodology, reading comprehension instruction, and the cultivation of critical literacy.

Within this intellectual landscape, the present study positions itself at the intersection of lexical semantics, literary analysis, and educational discourse by proposing an integrative examination of referential and contextual meaning in the fable “The Tortoise and the Hare” by Rob John. Unlike previous studies that tend to isolate semantic categories or prioritize either formal linguistic structures or broader interpretive frameworks, this research approaches meaning as a layered construct emerging through the interaction between explicit lexical reference and contextual symbolic interpretation. The study conceptualizes referential meaning not merely as denotative identification of narrative elements but as the semantic foundation upon which contextual meaning becomes intelligible, while contextual meaning is treated as a dynamic interpretive process through which readers attribute moral significance, behavioral symbolism, and social values to narrative events. Such positioning enables the study to bridge the divide between structural semantic analysis and interpretive literary criticism, while simultaneously contributing to educational discussions regarding how literary texts facilitate meaning-making processes among learners. By focusing specifically on a globally recognizable fable whose narrative simplicity conceals complex symbolic dimensions, this study also responds to the need for empirically grounded semantic analyses capable of demonstrating how moral narratives function as pedagogical instruments for linguistic and cognitive development.

This study aims to analyze the referential and contextual meanings embedded in “The Tortoise and the Hare” through a qualitative semantic approach that systematically examines lexical units, narrative events, and symbolic representations within the text. The research seeks to demonstrate how literal referential structures interact with contextual interpretation to construct the fable’s moral discourse and pedagogical significance. Theoretically, the study contributes to semantic scholarship by advancing a more integrative understanding of meaning production in literary narratives, particularly through the articulation of the interdependence between referential and contextual meaning. Methodologically, the research contributes by applying semantic analysis not only as a linguistic descriptive tool but also as a critical interpretive framework capable of connecting language, narrative symbolism, and educational meaning-making within a unified analytical model.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a non-empirical qualitative design grounded in textual and semantic analysis, as the research focused on interpreting linguistic meanings embedded within a literary text rather than generating data through human participants or field observation. The primary data source consisted of the fable *The Tortoise and the Hare* by Rob John, selected purposively due to its pedagogical relevance, narrative simplicity, and rich semantic structure that enables the identification of both referential and contextual meaning. Secondary sources included scholarly books and peer-reviewed journal articles in semantics, narratology, literary studies, and discourse interpretation that provided the theoretical foundation for the analysis. The selection criteria for the textual data were based on the presence of lexical units, narrative events, dialogues, and symbolic representations that potentially reflected explicit referential meaning and implicit contextual meaning within the story. The analytical framework of the study was derived from semantic theories concerning referential meaning, contextual meaning, and narrative interpretation, enabling the research to examine how literal linguistic expressions interact with implied moral and symbolic dimensions in the text.

The analytical procedure was conducted through several systematic stages in order to ensure interpretive rigor and conceptual consistency. First, the text was read repeatedly to achieve comprehensive contextual understanding and to identify linguistically significant expressions relevant to the research objectives. Second, words, phrases, sentences, and narrative events were categorized into referential and contextual meaning based on their semantic functions within the story. Third, each category was interpreted critically by relating lexical references to broader symbolic, moral, and contextual implications embedded in the narrative structure. To maintain analytical trustworthiness, the study applied theoretical triangulation by comparing interpretations across multiple semantic perspectives and scholarly references, while interpretive consistency was reinforced through repeated close-reading and comparative coding procedures. The research also prioritized textual transparency by

ensuring that all interpretations remained grounded in identifiable linguistic evidence within the primary text, thereby minimizing subjective overinterpretation and strengthening the credibility of the semantic analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Referential Meaning and Lexical Representation in the Narrative Structure

The semantic analysis revealed that referential meaning in *The Tortoise and the Hare* operates through lexical units that maintain stable denotative associations with identifiable entities, actions, and spatial orientations within the narrative structure. Words such as “hare,” “tortoise,” “race,” and “tree” function as concrete semantic references that guide readers toward a literal understanding of narrative progression. This lexical stability reflects the foundational principle of referential semantics in which linguistic signs establish correspondence with observable or conceptually recognizable objects (Sondheimer, 1978). The textual organization of the fable indicates that referential meaning serves as the initial cognitive framework through which readers process subsequent symbolic implications.

The lexical item “hare” demonstrates a particularly strong referential function because it immediately activates culturally familiar associations concerning speed, agility, and movement. Such semantic activation supports the argument that lexical meaning frequently depends on pre-existing cognitive categorization systems embedded within linguistic communities (Vetrov, 2022). The narrative consistently positions the hare within action-oriented clauses that emphasize motion and confidence, thereby reinforcing its referential stability throughout the story. Semantic continuity of this kind contributes to narrative coherence because readers are repeatedly directed toward the same referential field during textual interpretation.

The referential construction of spatial movement also emerged as a central semantic feature within the narrative discourse. Verbs such as “run,” “walk,” and “sleep” establish explicit action sequences that organize the temporal logic of the fable and provide measurable narrative progression. Persohn (2018) notes that motion verbs frequently encode not only physical movement but also conceptual orientation within narrative semantics, particularly in stories structured around journeys or competitions. The movement patterns in the text consequently function as lexical anchors that stabilize reader interpretation before contextual abstraction takes place.

The semantic significance of spatial reference became more evident through repeated references to the race path, the starting point, and the tree as the final destination. Spatial orientation in narrative discourse often serves as a referential mechanism that structures reader perception of action and narrative directionality (De Beuzeville et al., 2009). The tree, while initially functioning as a literal finishing point, also establishes narrative closure through its fixed spatial identity.

Referential certainty in this context allows readers to track narrative development without ambiguity regarding positional relationships among characters and events. The analytical categorization of lexical references identified several recurring semantic patterns within the narrative structure. These patterns are summarized in Table 1 to demonstrate how referential meaning is distributed across lexical categories and narrative functions.

Table 1. Referential Lexical Structures and Narrative Functions in *The Tortoise and the Hare*

Lexical Item	Referential Function	Narrative Role
Hare	Fast-moving animal	Symbolic competitor
Tortoise	Slow-moving reptile	Persistent participant
Race	Competitive event	Central narrative conflict
Tree	Spatial destination	Narrative closure
Run	Physical movement	Dynamic action
Sleep	Resting condition	Narrative interruption

Table 1 demonstrates that referential meaning in the fable depends heavily on concrete lexical items associated with physical entities and observable actions. The dominance of nouns and motion verbs indicates that semantic clarity is achieved through direct correspondence between language and

experiential reality. Such findings align with Chen and Chang (2024), who argue that core lexical items play a central role in organizing semantic comprehension within discourse production. Referential stability consequently becomes essential for preserving textual accessibility, particularly in narratives intended for educational audiences.

The narrative sequencing of lexical references also reflects broader principles of semantic organization within literary discourse. Clause construction repeatedly positions the tortoise and hare as grammatical subjects, thereby foregrounding their semantic prominence across the narrative trajectory. Johnston (2019) emphasizes that grammatical relations frequently shape interpretive emphasis because clause constituents determine how readers prioritize semantic information during discourse processing. Repetition of subject-centered reference in the fable therefore strengthens reader attention toward character-based meaning construction.

The interaction between referential meaning and temporal progression further reveals the structural precision of the narrative. Each event unfolds through clearly identifiable lexical markers that indicate sequential action, including challenge, preparation, competition, interruption, and conclusion. AnderBois et al. (2023) contend that referential continuity across discourse sequences contributes significantly to interpretive coherence because readers depend on stable reference tracking to understand evolving events. Narrative clarity in the fable emerges precisely because referential meanings remain semantically consistent across all stages of the story.

Close textual examination also revealed that referential meaning operates not only through isolated words but through relational semantic networks connecting characters, actions, and environments. The hare acquires meaning relationally through contrast with the tortoise, while the race derives significance through interaction between movement and competition. Schärfe (2007) argues that narrative structures generate meaning through patterned relational organization rather than through independent lexical units alone. Referential meaning in the fable consequently functions as an interconnected semantic system rather than a collection of detached denotative elements.

The findings indicate that referential meaning within *The Tortoise and the Hare* establishes the semantic infrastructure necessary for deeper interpretive engagement with the narrative. Literal lexical references provide cognitive stability that enables readers to navigate symbolic and contextual layers without losing narrative orientation. Schlenker (2018) suggests that contemporary semantic interpretation increasingly recognizes the necessity of integrating literal semantic structures with broader inferential frameworks. Referential meaning in the present text therefore operates not as a simplistic linguistic layer but as the structural foundation upon which contextual and moral interpretation becomes possible.

Contextual Meaning and Symbolic Interpretation in Moral Narrative

The analysis demonstrated that contextual meaning in *The Tortoise and the Hare* emerges through the interaction between narrative situations, character behavior, and implied moral associations that extend beyond literal lexical reference. Unlike referential meaning, contextual interpretation requires readers to infer symbolic significance from actions and relational dynamics embedded within the story. Depraetere (2019) explains that contextual meaning frequently operates at the interface between semantics and pragmatics, where interpretation depends on situational and inferential enrichment rather than denotative stability alone. The narrative consequently transforms simple actions into symbolic representations of ethical attitudes and behavioral values.

The character of the hare illustrates how contextual meaning develops through behavioral sequencing rather than through explicit authorial explanation. The hare's repeated displays of confidence, mockery, and negligence gradually construct an interpretive framework associated with arrogance and excessive self-assurance. Such meaning is not directly encoded in isolated lexical items but emerges cumulatively through narrative context and reader inference. Papafragou (2006) notes that interpretive understanding often depends on scalar implicature and contextual reasoning processes that allow readers to derive unstated evaluative meanings from discourse patterns.

The tortoise functions contextually as a symbolic embodiment of persistence, discipline, and consistency, despite being referentially represented as physically slow and limited in movement. Narrative emphasis on steady progression and uninterrupted effort transforms the tortoise into a moral archetype associated with perseverance under conditions of disadvantage. This symbolic elevation demonstrates how contextual meaning can override literal expectations established through referential

semantics. Schlenker (2018) argues that semantic interpretation increasingly depends on layered inferential structures in which literal meaning serves only as one component within broader conceptual understanding.

Contextual meaning also becomes visible through the reactions of secondary characters within the narrative environment. The silence of the animals during the hare's challenge and their later encouragement toward the tortoise create a collective evaluative atmosphere that shapes reader interpretation of social legitimacy and moral alignment. Social response in narrative discourse frequently functions as an indirect semantic marker guiding audience judgment regarding acceptable and unacceptable behavior (Wu et al., 2023).

Reader perception of the hare's arrogance therefore emerges not solely from individual action but from contextual positioning within the broader social environment of the story. The interpretive patterns identified during analysis reveal several dominant contextual meanings embedded in the narrative structure. These patterns are summarized in Table 2 to demonstrate how symbolic interpretation develops from narrative events and behavioral representation.

Table 2. Contextual and Symbolic Meanings of Narrative Events in *The Tortoise and the Hare*

Narrative Event	Contextual Meaning	Symbolic Implication
Hare mocks tortoise	Arrogance	Misuse of ability
Tortoise accepts challenge	Courage	Confidence through effort
Hare sleeps	Negligence	False security
Tortoise continues walking	Persistence	Ethical consistency
Animals cheer	Social validation	Collective recognition
Hare loses race	Moral consequence	Failure of overconfidence

Table 2 indicates that contextual meaning in the fable depends primarily on interpretive association between actions and moral evaluation rather than on literal lexical content. Narrative events function symbolically because readers attribute ethical significance to behavioral patterns across the story. Narančić Kovač (2019) observes that children's narratives often rely on symbolic simplification in order to facilitate moral comprehension through accessible interpretive structures. Contextual meaning in the present text consequently transforms straightforward narrative actions into broader reflections on discipline, humility, and responsibility.

The symbolic dimension of the race itself emerged as a major contextual structure within the narrative analysis. Referentially, the race constitutes a physical competition between two participants seeking to reach a destination first. Contextually, however, the race functions as an allegorical representation of social struggle, personal ambition, and the uneven distribution of natural ability. Robb and Van Hove (2003) emphasize that structured competition in cultural narratives frequently reflects broader social models of survival, territorial negotiation, and collective valuation of labor. The race therefore acquires interpretive depth because readers associate the competition with real-life experiences of challenge and perseverance.

The semantic interaction between motion and morality further reinforces contextual interpretation throughout the text. Continuous movement by the tortoise acquires ethical significance because persistence is framed narratively as more valuable than temporary superiority or innate speed. Stec (2012) argues that movement representation often operates metaphorically within communicative systems, allowing physical actions to signify cognitive or moral orientation. The tortoise's movement consequently becomes contextually associated with discipline and resilience rather than with mere locomotion.

The narrative's contextual structure also reveals a pedagogical orientation directed toward behavioral evaluation and moral internalization. Readers are encouraged to interpret consequences not as random narrative outcomes but as ethically structured responses to character disposition and decision-making. Nord (2003) suggests that children's literature frequently employs contextual simplification in order to strengthen moral accessibility while maintaining symbolic complexity beneath

surface narrative forms. Moral interpretation in the fable accordingly depends on readers' ability to connect character behavior with implied ethical judgment.

The findings further indicate that contextual meaning in the narrative relies heavily on inferential participation from readers. The story never explicitly states that arrogance causes failure or that persistence guarantees success, yet readers consistently derive these conclusions through contextual association and symbolic reasoning. Pientka and Schöpp (2020) contend that contextual interpretation requires active semantic reconstruction because meaning emerges dynamically from relational interaction among discourse elements. Reader engagement with the narrative therefore becomes an interpretive process in which implicit meaning is continuously assembled from contextual cues and narrative sequencing.

The analysis confirms that contextual meaning transforms *The Tortoise and the Hare* from a simple animal story into a morally charged narrative capable of sustaining educational and symbolic interpretation across cultural contexts. Behavioral representation, social response, and narrative consequence collectively generate interpretive depth that exceeds the literal semantic structure of the text. Zalizniak et al. (2012) explain that semantic interpretation frequently evolves through contextual reconfiguration in which lexical forms acquire expanded conceptual significance within discourse environments. Contextual meaning in the fable consequently operates as the primary mechanism through which moral symbolism and educational value become intelligible to readers.

The Interrelation of Referential and Contextual Meaning in Semantic Interpretation

The analysis revealed that referential and contextual meanings in *The Tortoise and the Hare* operate through a mutually dependent relationship in which literal lexical references provide the structural basis for symbolic interpretation. Referential meaning alone cannot fully explain the moral and philosophical implications embedded within the narrative, while contextual meaning cannot emerge coherently without stable lexical reference guiding reader orientation. This interaction reflects broader semantic theories asserting that meaning production depends on the continuous negotiation between denotational structures and interpretive inference (Depraetere, 2019). The narrative consequently demonstrates that semantic understanding in literary texts develops through layered interpretive integration rather than through isolated categories of meaning.

The lexical stability of the characters "hare" and "tortoise" creates the semantic foundation upon which contextual symbolism becomes intelligible. Readers initially recognize these figures as concrete animals with identifiable physical characteristics before assigning broader symbolic values related to arrogance or persistence. Sondheimer (1978) argues that referential semantics functions as a cognitive anchoring mechanism because readers require stable object identification prior to engaging in higher-order interpretation. Contextual meaning in the fable therefore depends fundamentally on the prior establishment of referential certainty within the narrative structure.

The interaction between literal action and symbolic implication became particularly evident in narrative events involving movement and interruption. The hare's act of sleeping functions referentially as a temporary cessation of physical activity, yet contextually it signifies negligence, complacency, and excessive confidence. Such semantic layering reflects the principle that contextual interpretation frequently transforms ordinary actions into morally evaluative signs within narrative discourse (Stec, 2012). Reader interpretation accordingly moves from observable behavior toward abstract ethical judgment through inferential semantic processes.

The tortoise's continuous movement presents a parallel interaction between referential and contextual meaning. Referentially, the tortoise merely advances slowly toward the destination through repetitive physical effort. Contextually, this movement acquires symbolic significance associated with endurance, discipline, and consistency in the face of disadvantage. Persohn (2018) explains that motion-related expressions often develop metaphorical extensions that connect physical orientation with conceptual and moral interpretation. Narrative movement in the present text consequently operates simultaneously at literal and symbolic semantic levels.

The relationship between referential and contextual meaning can be observed more systematically through comparative semantic patterns identified during analysis. These patterns are summarized in Table 3 to illustrate how literal narrative actions generate broader contextual interpretation within the story.

Table 3. Interrelationship between Referential Expressions and Contextual Interpretations in *The Tortoise and the Hare*

Referential Expression	Literal Meaning	Contextual Interpretation
Hare runs quickly	Physical speed	Natural advantage
Tortoise walks slowly	Limited movement	Persistent effort
Hare sleeps mid-race	Resting action	Carelessness
Animals cheer	Vocal response	Social recognition
Tortoise reaches tree	Completion of race	Success through discipline
Hare loses race	Competitive defeat	Consequence of arrogance

Table 3 indicates that contextual meaning consistently emerges from referential structures rather than replacing them entirely. Literal actions remain semantically present even as readers attach broader interpretive significance to narrative events. Pientka and Schöpp (2020) maintain that contextual semantic systems depend upon structurally identifiable referential frameworks capable of supporting inferential expansion. Semantic interpretation in the fable therefore operates cumulatively through interaction between concrete narrative representation and symbolic abstraction.

The integration of referential and contextual meaning also contributes significantly to the pedagogical effectiveness of the narrative. Readers with limited linguistic or literary experience can still comprehend the story at a literal level through stable lexical references, while more advanced readers can derive ethical and symbolic implications through contextual inference. Papafragou (2006) suggests that interpretive development in narrative comprehension often progresses from literal semantic decoding toward inferential contextual reasoning. The fable's semantic structure consequently accommodates multiple levels of interpretive engagement without sacrificing narrative accessibility.

The findings further demonstrate that narrative coherence depends on the balanced coordination between semantic explicitness and interpretive openness. Excessive reliance on contextual symbolism without referential stability could produce ambiguity, while purely referential narration without contextual depth would reduce the story to mechanical description. Schärfe (2007) argues that narratological effectiveness frequently emerges through equilibrium between structural clarity and symbolic complexity. The present narrative sustains this equilibrium by allowing contextual interpretation to evolve organically from clearly identifiable lexical and narrative structures.

The semantic interdependence identified in the analysis also aligns with broader discussions concerning contextualized meaning within discourse studies and communication theory. Wu et al. (2023) observe that rhetorical and narrative discourse frequently constructs identity and evaluative meaning through interaction between explicit lexical forms and implied contextual positioning. Similar mechanisms appear in the present text because character identity is shaped not solely through description but through interpretive association between actions, reactions, and consequences. Semantic interpretation in the narrative therefore functions relationally rather than through isolated lexical decoding.

The integration of referential and contextual meaning additionally reflects tendencies identified in studies of semantic shifts and interpretive flexibility across communicative systems. Zalizniak et al. (2012) explain that lexical forms often acquire expanded semantic value when embedded within culturally recognizable narrative frameworks. The present analysis demonstrates that ordinary lexical references such as "race," "walk," and "sleep" gain broader moral and symbolic significance through narrative contextualization. Referential meaning consequently becomes semantically productive because it enables the emergence of contextual interpretation rather than limiting interpretive possibility.

The findings confirm that semantic interpretation in *The Tortoise and the Hare* depends on a dynamic interaction between literal reference and contextual symbolism that collectively generates the narrative's moral and pedagogical force. Referential meaning structures reader orientation through lexical clarity, while contextual meaning deepens interpretation through symbolic association and inferential reasoning. Schlenker (2018) argues that contemporary semantic inquiry increasingly recognizes meaning as a multilayered phenomenon shaped simultaneously by linguistic structure and

contextual cognition. The narrative examined in this study exemplifies this semantic complexity by demonstrating how simple lexical expressions can support sophisticated interpretive and educational functions within literary discourse.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that semantic interpretation in *The Tortoise and the Hare* is constructed through a dynamic interaction between referential meaning and contextual meaning, both of which contribute significantly to the narrative's moral, symbolic, and pedagogical dimensions. Referential meaning functions as the semantic foundation of the text by establishing stable lexical references associated with characters, actions, movements, and spatial orientation, enabling readers to comprehend the literal structure of the narrative with clarity and coherence. Contextual meaning extends this literal framework into a broader interpretive domain in which character behavior, narrative consequences, and symbolic actions generate ethical implications related to persistence, arrogance, discipline, and responsibility. The findings reveal that literal expressions and contextual interpretation cannot be separated because contextual symbolism consistently emerges from referential structures embedded within the narrative discourse. The study further confirms that semantic meaning in literary texts operates relationally through inferential processes shaped by narrative sequencing, social evaluation, and symbolic representation. Semantic analysis of the fable also illustrates the pedagogical potential of literary narratives in developing critical reading skills, interpretive awareness, and moral reasoning within language education. The research contributes theoretically to semantic and literary studies by demonstrating that meaning construction in narrative discourse depends on the integration of lexical reference and contextual inference rather than on isolated semantic categories.

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