

The exploitation of atelicity in engendering lowered expectations of public transit in early childhood

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In the early part of the twentieth century, nearly every American city had a reliable, well-used public transit system based on busses or street cars. In this paper, we show that the decline of American public transport usage correlates directly with an increase in the use of nursery rhyme in early childhood education. Specifically, the introduction of a particular nursery song into common usage has trained American children since an early age to associate bus travel with unpleasant bouncing sensations, lousy weather, aggressive drivers, and, crucially, *atelicity* — a chronic failure to reach the endpoint of the bus travel event. It is our contention that this nursery song is almost entirely responsible for the wholesale rejection of public transit by the American middle class and the attendant increase in personal car ownership, the flight to the suburbs, urban sprawl, U.S. dependence on foreign oil, smog, the increased incidence of asthma and obesity, and the tragic epidemic of crotch burns from spilled coffee that continues to plague our nation.

The song in question, “The Wheels on the Bus” (WOTB), uses every available linguistic device to cue the learner to atelicity of the bus travel event. Consider the first verse:

- (1) The wheels of the bus go round and round,
 round and round,
 round and round,
 The wheels of the bus go round and round
 all day long.

The main verb of the sentence is in the present tense, denoting habitual aspect. The Path-denoting ‘round’ is both coordinated and iterated, to emphasize the absence of a Goal endpoint to the conceptually infinite Path. Finally, the temporal frame adverbial ‘all day long’, which may only compose with atelic predicates, underscores the atelicity of the event denoted by the verb phrase while simultaneously entailing that bus travel (habitually!) occupies at least a full day.

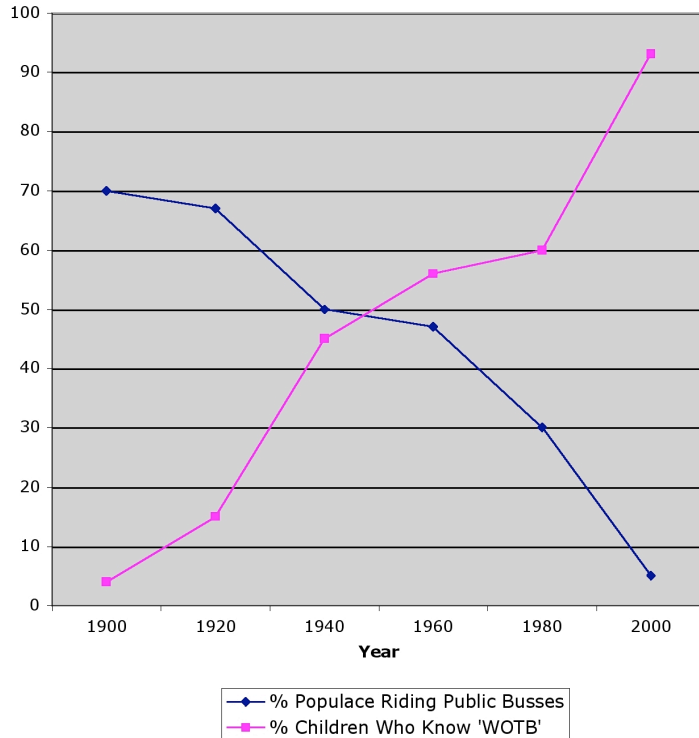
As the song progresses, the ‘busses are bad’ subtext becomes more and more blatant. Consider the content of the second, third, and fourth verses (all of which exhibit the tense marking, iteration/coordination, and frame adverbial underscoring atelicity):

- (2) a. The people on the bus go up and down, up and down...
 b. The wipers on the bus go swish-swish-swish, swish-swish-swish
 c. The driver on the bus goes, “Move on back!”, “Move on back”...

The not-so-subliminal message is that anyone riding the bus is letting themselves in for an endless nightmare of jouncing along through inclement weather, trapped in a small space with a bossy, misanthropic driver. Small wonder that as the percentage of children attending preschools has increased, bus ridership has declined (Fig 1). Note the spike in WOTB spread after 1980, when penetration of tapes and CDs for children reached nearly 100% in American households due to increased availability of personal stereo systems, and the corresponding precipitous decline in public bus ridership.

Finally, we feel compelled to point out that many preschool programs are funded by the federal government, which is virtually controlled by the automobile and oil lobbies. We feel that it is not unlikely that the entire *raison d'être* of these programs is to disseminate this anti-bus propaganda. At great personal risk, we have obtained the attached photographic documentation of a federal agent entering a preschool building, obviously intending to plant Raffi CDs of the song in question in every classroom (Fig. 2).

Inverse correlation of WOTB with public bus ridership in the 20th century



Federal agent suspected of delivering WOTB CDs

