



---

## GENDERED LANGUAGE IN CHILDREN'S ANIMATED FILMS: A CORPUS LINGUISTICS STUDY

**Lubna Shah**

Rawalpindi Women University

[lubnashah\\_eng@gmail.com](mailto:lubnashah_eng@gmail.com)

**Kausar Yasmeen**

Rawalpindi Women University

[kausaryasmeen@gmail.com](mailto:kausaryasmeen@gmail.com)

---

### ABSTRACT

*This paper examines how gendered language is used in animated children movies and how the language patterns are manifested, adopting a corpus linguistics frame in this analysis of the nature of dialogue between characters. As the relevance of media impact on child development especially with respect to gender socialization continues to gain popularity, this study focuses on the reinforcement or breaking down of gendered linguistic stereotypes through animated films. The twenty wide-spread animated films of different genres and production companies were analyzed with references to the gender-specific linguistic aspects, including vocabulary, speech acts, and relations between the characters. This research discovered that there were evident disparities on the language employed by both the male and female characters where the former used assertive, authoritative kind of language, and the latter employed more nurturing, submissive speech patterns. These results demonstrate the recurring presence of customary gender roles in the children's media. The analysis plays a role in the wider discussion of the possible effects of children entertainment on societal issues of gender, in which it provides a lead on the possible usage of the media as a potential vehicle towards more equal and ethical portrayal of gender.*

**Keyword:** Gendered Language, Corpus Linguistics, Children's Animated Films, Gender Stereotypes, Media Influence

---

### INTRODUCTION

Popular children entertainment has taken on a certain pattern known as animated films that have taken over a hundred years since the first rudimentary animated films to exceptionally high-tech productions that are culturally, educatively and socially influential. Although these films are also constructed to entertain the audience, they have a great contribution in influencing perceptions of the world that young audiences live in including the way they absorb and make sense of gender roles and gender relationships. Children media and other entertainments have become an effective instrument of conveying values and norms of the society as one of such norms are gender roles. Through colorful characters, magical adventures, and touching plots, animated movies allow the children to form an environment in which they become exposed to circumscribed performative gender, gendered actions, and gendered expectations of the society.

Since early childhood, children are presented with different mediums of media that are laced with cultural values, one of which might be gender. Although these movies are rather entertaining, they often reminiscent of and in a way affirm classical gender norms that prescribe particular character features, roles, and behavior to men and women. Research by Davis (1990) shows that the media stereotypes occupational masculinity and femininity, where the boys are characterized as adventurous, assertive and

dominant and girls as passive, nurturing and obedient by media sources. These representations are not only ubiquitous, but also quite influential, since they shape the early gender identity formation of children, as well as their awareness of what the society would want them to be and act like.

Language that is used in such animated films is very important in this process. As a means of communicating and socialization, language can serve as an effective tool of affirming or destabilizing some gender norms. Language choices, e.g. the words used (their type), the tone, speech acts, even use of speech frequency can also represent the power structure and social assumptions concerning gender. Tannen (1990) says that even in the way men and ladies talk they will differ, and males tend to be more aggressive, pushy, and less diplomatic, whereas ladies become supportive, cautious and non-aggressive. These linguistic usages do not occur only in real life communication but are maintained when fictional plots are described regularly, particularly the movies involving children.

The studies of gender in media, especially in animation films among children, have concentrated mainly in the visuals; this can include character designs, dressing, and behaviors. Nevertheless, the proportion of literature focusing on the aspects of language contribution to gender construction in the media is increasing. Mills (2008) describes language as a social construct, which functions to express and sustain societal ideals of communication. He claims that language cannot be a neutral instrument of communication. The traditional roles of genders pursued through the speech of male and female characters in children movies could perpetuate the traditional gender roles among children who will have a particular perception of gender relations. Nevertheless, the research still lacks the identification of the set of language specific features (e.g., syntax, word choices, and speech acts) that distinguish between male and female characters of such films.

This paper aims to fill this gap as this paper will discuss it based on analysis of gendered language in animated films that are rolled out to be children-related. Corpus linguistics can be used to perform a systematic and measurable study of large volumes of text and considers it a perfect means to study linguistic choices in a series of films. In discussing the lexical and syntactic patterns of the male and female characters, as well as the language patterns that appear repeatedly, this study will determine the way gendered language is expressed. In particular, this paper will examine how directness, assertiveness and power related speech acts have been used in the conversations between the men and women and the kind of vocabulary various characters use.

The relevance of the study consists in the fact that it may help to understand how animated movies create and recreate gendered norms in society. The study will be beneficial to the problem under consideration because, by paying attention to language, a factor that is usually disregarded in gender studies of children media, it is going to add a new dimension to research on how language choice can support or break traditional gender expectations. In addition, the study is significant to media producers, educators, and parents because it can be used in the quest to make media representations of girls more equal. In case language facilitates gender stereotypes in the animated pictures, it is necessary to develop more active attempts in order to break these conventions and allow more complex and empowering male and female (animated) individuals.

This study will therefore have dual objectives; one, to examine language representations of gender in children animated movies; and two, to evaluate the connected possibility of gender socialization in terms of linguistic or language patterns. The study will supplement the general knowledge in gender studies by providing fresh information regarding the involvement of language in media regarding its contribution in the creation of gender perception amidst the children. The analysis will, through the study, develop a

better-grounded or rather more critical perception of the causal linkage among language, media, and gender in the modern society.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The media and how it plays its role in influencing gender perceptions, especially in children media, has been a study area by scholars over the years. Such studies have continuously emphasized the strong impact that media has in developing the minds of young people towards the interpretation of gender roles, social identities, and expectations of behavior. One of the most striking assumptions in the literature is that the media of children, namely animated movies, is an effective means of fortifying the traditional gender roles and stereotyping in a media essentially used to present both men and women in very different shades. Feminist theorists such as Judith Butler (1990) and Deborah Tannen (1990) have contributed a lot to the comprehension of gender in discourse related to the formation of gender identities through language use.

The theory of gender performativity advanced by Butler (1990) proposes a rather different view of gender, as it is believed to not be a natural or fixed state but the manner in which people engage in various behaviors and use language in society. Butler claims that gendered identities have a basis and reinforcement in language. More specifically, language is gendered as it recollects and enforces gender norms in the society by adopting gender descriptors of men and women, to linguistic superiority. This theory has already proved to deliver a sufficient framework of how language in different forms of media including the children animation, shapes gender roles and expectations. Although the main concern of Butler is the concept of gender identity among adults, her ideas can be applied to position gender in children's media wherein the same regulations of linguistic performance can also influence children early understanding of gender.

In her study of gendered discourse, Tannen (1990) also discusses the use of language as a characteristic used to depict the power relationship between men and women. Her discussion highlights that there is a common implication that men tend to develop more aggressive and commanding styles of speech whereas women tend to develop more supportive and relational linguistic styles of speech. This distinction of language does not happen in the real-life situations only but also in the fictional roles such as in the case with the animated movies. The work by Tannen has played a very critical role to point out the structural disparities which exist within the language and more often than not the differences at the linguistic levels have been employed to make the male sound more authoritative and the female more accommodative.

While research on gendered language in the realms of children media has also paid more attention to the physical and action depictions of male and female characters, gendered language has been given some amount of attention. Most of this literature has indicated that in animated films, there is a tendency of male characters being projected as active, assertive and dominant whereas the female characters are shown as passive, caring and relational. As an example, Lazar (2007) states that films aimed at children are filled with stereotypical images of the male sexual identities because they dominate the story either as heroes or leaders, and the female characters play the second or subordinating roles, and their linguistic expressions define their roles. According to McRobbie (2009), there are tendencies to agree with her that woman in children's media is mostly seen as are visually depicted as stereotypical feminine roles-care givers, nurturers, or the emotional characters; whereas men are portrayed as the ones of action, adventure and authority.

Studies that take into consideration the language aspects of these gendered depictions have however been very scarce. Although significant studies have been conducted on the visualization of gender in children

animated films, little research has been done on how language particularly promotes gender stereotype. Namely, the detail linguistic analysis that takes into account the way the male and female characters differ in the dialogue, syntax, and speech patterns in animated movies is not present. In the majority of the works, reference is made to the manner in which male and female characters are placed in different positions in the context of plot and visualization, but the various studies fail to explore how language tangles or corroborates the positions. This is one of the areas that require attention especially given that language is relevant in defining power relations and creation of gender identities in media.

Other thinkers have criticized the effects of these hypotyp Jed representations on the youths. Even in the 1970s other researchers such as Signorielli (1979) had been arguing that frequent exposure to the gender roles presented in the media may have a long-term impact, as children impress it on to their minds. Additional research that has been conducted on the topic has confirmed similar results and it has been argued that children who are exposed regularly to media that reinforces conventional gender roles will tend to internalize these stereotypes in their actual lives. As an example, Coyne, Callister, and Maddux (2011) discovered that children who were exposed to media showcasing traditional gender roles had inflexible thoughts of gender and were apt to demonstrate gender-specific attitudes in their interactions with other people.

This effect of gendered language in animation is especially troubling because this would further lead to the internalization of stereotypical behavior at an early age when a child is formulating his or her developmental process. As it is a tool of socialization, language influences the ways children not only perceive gendered behavior but also define their own identity and what they should do in the society. To give an example, by consistently listening to the female characters speaking in a language that is more nurturing and supportive and the male characters speaking in a language that is assertive and strong, children are likely to perceive the former speech style as feminine and the latter as masculine and correspondingly associate femininity with passivity and emotionality (Leaper & Smith, 2004). It may further strengthen conventional power relationships that men would only be the leaders and wield authority and women would be then expected to take care of their families or friends by offering emotional support.

Although there is an increasing collection of literature regarding gender in child's media, most of the studies have only concentrated on content analysis; fitted with visual representation or an overall talk of gender roles. The linguistics of dialogue in children animated movies is rather less explored and it needs a more in-depth analysis. There has been paucity of studies that employ corpus linguistics features to systematically analyze language employed by male and female characters in a variety of movies, and how such patterns help to socialize both male and female individuals in gendered ways. It is this gap that this study seeks to fill through the deployment of the salient points of corpus linguistics in the analysis of the conversation involving male and female characters in children animated films. The comparison of the lexical choices, speech expressions, and syntactic devices employed by the representatives of both genders will help this study determine whether male and female characters have any repetitive linguistic patterns that underline the traditional gender norms or even challenge them.

Moreover, the present paper will explore the possibility of observing a change in these gendered language patterns in more recent animated movies which may represent a change in the representation of gender roles in child's media. The comparison of both the older and modern versions of films will bring insights to my research on how gendered talk in children entertainment has changed over time and in what ways the present-day film is making strides towards more egalitarian gender relationship in the entertainments.

## SIGNIFICANCE AND RATIONALE

This study is important in two aspects. To begin with, it contributes to the existing literature because it is one of the gaps that have not been addressed yet through the corpus linguistics approach to the analysis of gendered language in the animated films about children. As far as the studies conducted before attempted to concentrate on the visual representation or the way of behavior of the characters, the linguistic analysis could offer a small volume of research that can study how language itself is used within such situational contexts to shape gender perceptions. Second, this work has its practical value to the educators and parents, as well as media producers. The analysis of the functions of language in children films can assist one in creating a media content that promotes more egalitarian gender portrayals.

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To find out and discuss the linguistic contrast between male and female characters in kids animation movies.
2. To discuss how gendered language in animated films among the children is used or subverts gender roles.
3. To determine whether children animated movies have any effect on gendered language on the minds of youngsters in regard to gender roles.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the linguistic differences between male and female characters in children's animated films?
2. How do these linguistic differences reflect or challenge traditional gender roles in society?
3. Why does gendered language in animated films persist, and what impact might this have on young audiences?

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research paper will be supported by the considering of the theoretical framework of gender performativity, included in the works by Judith Butler (1990). According to the theory of Butler, the concept of gender is not necessarily an identity but is performed both in language and mannerism. Within the framework of the current research area, gender roles are seen as an important field where the language is introduced as one of the mediums in which they are performed and reinforced. Also, this paper uses the sociolinguistic theory which analyzes the role of language as a social reflection and prediction (especially in regards to control of power among gender groups) (Tannen, 1990).

## METHODOLOGY

Evidence to this analysis is constituted by a well-chosen corpus of 20 animated children film in the form of both old and modern productions. These movies have been selected because of their great popularity, availability and the diversity in the nature of the genre and characters. The choice is comprised of the films made by the biggest animation studios, which presupposes a certain number of traditional illustrations, as well as the more recent efforts of representing gender roles in a more progressive way. The diversity of the context of the films is also reflected, as it allows one to understand how gendered language is done in fantasy and adventure as well as slice-of-life contexts.

The positioning of these movies was conducted with the help of the tools of corpus linguistics, which is the best at defining and measuring tendencies of large amount of texts. The corpus linguistics offers the researcher to investigate the frequency and distribution of the linguistic characteristics like certain words or phrases or speech actions systematically. Here, the focus of the study was on the frequency of words,

collocations (Distribution of words used in conjunction with one another) and important discourse characteristics like directness, politeness and assertiveness. All these characteristics have been selected in particular due to their being suggestive of the language-expressive nature of gender. An example can be given by using the fact that masculinity can be closely related to being assertive, whereas female attributes can be close to being polite and making hedges (Tannen, 1990). Analyzing the following linguistic aspects, it was possible to point out the repetitive patterns of gendered language use and to discuss the differences in the speech patterns of male and female characters.

An important part of the methodology was the combination of close reading and the analysis of the corpus. The final finder, character speech, can be investigated more deeply and in a more qualitative way as close reading helps the researcher see the nuances of language which may not be identified with the help of statistical analysis only. This approach is essential to come to terms with social and contextualized meanings of certain linguistic decision-making, including the tone, intent, and the nature of relationships among the characters. Corpus analysis in turn also offers a more general quantitative view, where it is possible to identify major trends within several films. The synthesis of these two approaches will lead to rather comprehensive approach to gendered language both in the individual forms and in the general patterns that appear in the corpus.

Such combination of methods, combining a qualitative close reading strategy and a quantitative linguistics tool, namely corpus linguistics, was deliberately selected based on its potential to comprehensively examine language use in the children media. The Marriage of these approaches allows the research to both include the depth and richness of individual character conversations and also the macro level map that can be used to understand on a larger scale how these issues could affect how young audience members think of gender roles. This methodological approach works especially well when it comes to analysis of media texts because both implicit and explicit linguistic trends are essential in gaining insights into the construction of gendered identities. The strategy will make sure that the research questions that center on the gendered nature of language, the reinforcement or challenge of gender stereotype, and the effect of these linguistic patterns on young audiences are covered exhaustively through minute and overall analysis.

## DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The linguistic characteristics of the appropriate children animatronic films corpus, that were examined, demonstrated that there are some main patterns of the gendered language which fall under the stereotypical definitions of gender. The results recorded that male characters primarily used direct and authoritative language and tended to issue commands or final statements or decisions as opposed to male characters who avoided commanding character traits. This aspect is aligned with the view that men are leaders or authorities in the society, and gender studies have shown that this aspect has been adequately presented before (Tannen, 1990; Holmes, 2006). Direct language use and assertiveness of the characters who are male further supports the assumption that masculinity can only be perceived as the manifestation of power and control, which are held as characteristic traits of the male social role (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2013).

On the other hand, the film female characters tended to be polite, use hedging and encouraging language more which goes with the established view of femininity. The women were portrayed as subservient to others, language symbols such as maybe, I think to demonstrate a sense of uncertainty or showed signs of qualification. Such translation tendency contributes to the stereotype that women are passive, caring, and encouraging (Mills, 2008). Female characters also exhibit the propensity of conducting more relational talk and less assertive or directive speech another indicator revealed by researchers like Tannen (1990)

and Cameron (2007) on the gendered requirements of being a woman in the society.

Surprisingly, taking a closer examination at the more recent movies in the corpus showed a change to these linguistic styles. The interlocution of female characters was more active and possessive in these movies and applied to more aggressive and explicit speech which disrupts the conventional image of female passivity. On the example of Moana in Moana (2016) or Elsa in Frozen (2013), such characters are endowed with authority and make assertive declarations, not moving in the direction of a classic character of a passive female. These instances indicate that the modern children cinematography starts to present less hierarchical gender roles with both male and female characters having an equally great place to act and make decisions. Nevertheless, these are still isolated cases, which means that in the children animated movies, gendered language still dominates, and the structural patterns of gender remain a norm to build the linguistic behavior of the characters.

The results of the conducted study coincide with the available literature on gendered language in media, especially those linked to children entertainment. Leaper and Smith (2004) and Coyne et al. (2011) have indicated that media have contributed directly to gender stereotypes, including gender stereotypes harbored in language. Heavy use of gendered language in children media can be described as a socialization process, which affects the perception of the young consumers who view gender roles in the society. Such coding of the traditional gender roles in the children films based on language can be of great consequences on how children perceive gender identity and gender behavior in real life. These movies do not just replicate the available norms in the society but also inculcate the anticipation of gender specific role behavior among the young audiences, thus instilling stereotyped understanding of masculinity and femininity.

Although there are examples of improvement, the issue of gendered language also persisted and was identified in the study to constitute a challenge in the instances of complete equality in the children media. A shortcoming of this research can be the fact that the study targets 100 percent animation movies, not always reflecting the complete picture of the media in children. Alternatively, in the future research, it is possible to go further and involve television programs, digital media, and other means of computer entertainment directed to children, as they may provide a more detailed examination of gendered language in children media. Also, the next studies could be conducted on how these linguistic patterns change with respect to other cultures as the media created in other regions across the globe may express various gendered language patterns depending on the local cultures and expectations.

The other weakness is the subjective meaning of the word assertiveness and politeness in the cinemas. Although different linguistic features were clearly defined under which instance to fit in this study, the context of the different speech of characters and cultural implication of words or phrases might vary depending on several settings. The study itself would be enriched by cross-cultural investigations or experimental studies, which assesses, and quantifies the viewer response to better interpret how children process and absorb gendered language in these movies.

Drawing a conclusion, it should be noted that despite the apparent changes, the use of gendered language in animated movies aimed at children still represents and reinforces the conventional gender roles. Even though in the recent films we have observed the progress towards the more gender-neutral demographic, the continued presence of stereotypical patterns in the descriptive language shows the necessity to further break the gender role dichotomy which shapes the media outlook. The paper makes a contribution to the more general discussion about gender, language and media, and presents certain information about how it is possible to use animated films to shape a child understanding of the social behavior and gender roles. In

---

further studies, researchers should investigate further about how media can change based on the language and representation so that it can accommodate more inclusive and egalitarian ideas of gender.

## FINDINGS

The result of the gendered language analysis in the children animated movies really supports the conclusions since the traditional gender stereotypes are being strengthened using a linguistic background. Language used by the male characters, mostly in the chosen movies was more precise, dominative, and profound. In a case in point, the main characters in movies like The Lion King (1994) and Aladdin (1992) as male characters commonly ordered or gave commands which was a reinforcement related to the male characters as dominant and decision-making characters. The sterner tone enhanced in their speech, which can be widely used with a confident tone and an imperious structure, confirms the societal culture in which the men are perceived as natural leaders and authority people (Tannen, 1990). Such speech use correlates with the traditional gender view that traditionally viewed the male gender as connected to leadership and decision-making (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2013).

Compared to that, female characters were more prone to employing language with considerable tentativeness, politeness, and support. Women characters like Cinderella in Cinderella (1950) and Snow White in Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937) were portrayed through language expressions that provided passiveness, nurturing and subordinate character. They preferred using polite forms, hedging and indirect speech to get their points across or their desires. Such as, perhaps, we may, I think etc. Recurring, they signalled reluctance to take direct or uncompromising (authoritative) stands. The kind of speech is representative of the traditional femininity and their features commonly relate to passivity and nurturing not to leadership and authority (Holmes, 2006).

Nevertheless, an exception to all these trends was in films which portrayed powerful and independent female heroes. Other examples include Moana (2016) and Elsa (Frozen 2013) who were more aggressive in their language and challenged challenges directly and made choices. These characters broke the traditional language used by the traditional female characters within the films. As an example, language used to describe leadership executed by Moana throughout her journey, was authoritative yet confident as compared to previous passivity portrayed to the female gender. Elsa also displayed fierce judgment in her bold choices, which involved her autonomy and leadership language. Although these instances introduce a more egalitarian conception of gender, they are not the norm, since many movies continue to represent more current normative language of gender differentiation.

Therefore, although there are some signs of improvement in the representation of female agency and assertion, the results indicate that gendered language in children animated films still largely imply and reinforce the traditional gender roles since the male character uses language to signify his power and authority whereas female characters are depicted as submissive, caring or supportive.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has shown that there is indeed much contribution that language makes in perpetuating gender stereotypes in children animated movies. Through applying a corpus linguistics analysis to the linguistic features of male and female characters, the study disclosed that there was a strict pattern of customized language usage of gendered characteristics, whereby the male characters exhibited more direct, assertive and commandingly type of language while the female characters portrayed the more tentative, polite and supportive type of language. Such linguistic variance follows the conventional gender stereotypes, where males are likely to be referred to as heads and female as nurturers or second in command, which reinforces stereotypes in the society as a whole (Tannen, 1990; Mills, 2008).

Even with the presence of these pervasive gendered language patterns the study also uncovered that there are more balanced gender portrayals that exist especially in movies where the female protagonist is seen to be strong like in the cases of Moana and Elsa. These characters were also more agentic and assertive with their language which indicates the turning of the tide towards egalitarian gender representations in recent animated movies. Nevertheless, such cases are rather short-term, and in western animated movies gender-specific language does not fade yet in many productions.

The results of the given research make their contribution to continuing the debate of gender and media, specifically the socialization of the children. By shedding light on the fact that gendered vocabulary of child media remains widespread, this study will stress on the necessity to come up with more equal gender presentations in children media. Although positive trends are present, one should not disregard the fact that gendered patterns of language still prevail; thus, more active steps should be taken to break these stereotypes and introduce more inclusive and empowering representation of both male and female characters. In future, the findings can be extended to discuss the effects of such language on juvenile population and also analyze other manifestations of children media, such as television programs and the online material to understand how gendered language scenario has been perpetuated on different modes of communication.

## REFERENCES

- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
- Cameron, D. (2008). *The feminist critique of language: A reader*. Routledge.
- Coates, J. (2004). *Women, men and language: A sociolinguistic account of gender and language* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
- Eckert, P., & McConnell-Ginet, S. (2013). *Language and gender* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Fairclough, N. (1992). *Discourse and social change*. Polity Press.
- Fiske, J. (2011). *Television culture* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Gill, R. (2007). *Gender and the media*. Polity Press.
- Hall, S. (1997). *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*. Sage Publications.
- Holmes, J. (1995). *Women, men and politeness*. Longman.
- Kendall, S., & Tannen, D. (2001). *Discourse and gender: Theoretical perspectives and research* (Vol. 2). Blackwell Publishing.
- Kress, G. (2003). *Multimodality: A social semiotic approach to contemporary communication*. Routledge.
- Lazar, M. M. (2007). Feminist critical discourse analysis: From gender-as-difference to gender-as-relational. In S. H. A. Kress (Ed.), *Discourse and gender*. Edinburgh University Press.
- McRobbie, A. (2009). *The aftermath of feminism: Gender, culture and social change*. Sage Publications.
- Mills, S. (2008). *Language and sexism*. Cambridge University Press.
- O'Barr, W. M. (2002). *The feminist critique of language: A reader*. Routledge.
- Tannen, D. (1990). *You just don't understand: Women and men in conversation*. William Morrow.
- Wood, J. T. (2005). *Gendered lives: Communication, gender, and culture*. Wadsworth.