1 Introduction

A Whole New World?

I think of a child’s mind as a blank book. During the first years of his [sic] life, much will be written on the pages. The quality of that writing will affect his [sic] life profoundly.

Walt Disney, cited in Giroux and Pollock (2010)

The Power of Children’s Media

What’s Your Favorite Disney Movie?

We ask this question of our audiences all the time and get a wide range of answers. It’s surprisingly rare, though, for anyone to say I don’t have one, much less I haven’t seen any Disney movies. And it’s very common for the students we meet (or teach) to report having watched their favorite hundreds of times. As a child, the first author’s favorite Disney movie was The Aristocats (1970), a movie she had never actually seen. She just knew it featured a white cat (for which she had glimpsed the plush reproduction toy on a rare visit to the park) and that other little girls were talking about it. Such is the power of Uncle Walt.

When we first began presenting our research, we discovered almost immediately that anything with the word Disney in it drew a crowd. Talking about the Disney Princess films was like ringing a Pavlovian bell that brought a surge of interest from fellow linguists, journalists, and our friends and family (including some who had had very little interest in our work before). After we presented our first paper at the Linguistics Society of America annual meeting in 2016, there was an explosion of interest from the popular press. The initial spark was an article by Jeff Guo in the Washington Post (“Researchers have found a major problem with ‘The Little Mermaid’ and other Disney movies”), which led to numerous articles across a variety of internet sites, as well as two notable accolades at more or less opposite ends of the media spectrum: (1) publication of our charts in a special edition of National Geographic on children and their situation across the globe.
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(Nowakowski 2017), and (2) a brief reference in the Weekend Update section of a *Saturday Night Live* episode.

We mention this trend, not to prove that we are the popular girls and you should sit with us at lunchtime, or that this attention shows how impressive our research is. In fact, very few of those who talked to us about the project were particularly interested in the scholarly quality of our work. Rather, the point is that Disney itself has a tremendous amount of power and influence in the media and beyond. Each new addition to the Disney/Pixar canon seems to be a lightning rod for political commentary by everyone from film critics and mass market authors to YouTubers and Mommy-blogs.

So now it’s our turn. This book presents the culmination of over a decade of research on language and gender in children’s films. And the period of filmmaking that we cover is much longer than that: exactly 80 years, from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in 1937 to *Coco* in 2017. We have conducted an analysis of the 31 films included here using sociolinguistic methodologies. Our analysis begins with some basic facts—like who speaks more in the films, and by how much—and then focuses more closely on a number of specific speech acts in the films, including compliments, directives, insults, and apologies. We use quantitative methods to find broad trends in data and then use in-depth qualitative analyses to explore more nuanced aspects of our findings. By combining different techniques of linguistic analysis in this way, we are able to give an overview of a large section of the animated media landscape and to document patterns that might not be evident from analyzing an individual film. We also will be looking at these linguistic trends in their full context, though, by exploring how they work in specific scenes, where characters interact with specific aims and motives.

Have You Checked the Children? The Influence of Media

Children’s media matters a great deal when it comes to how children understand their world. We know that kids are watching bucketloads of TV and movies and learning important lessons from them. A 2019 report by Common Sense Media found that kids aged 0–8 spend, on average, close to two hours per day watching TV (Rideout & Robb 2020). One study showed that by the time kids entered kindergarten, they knew more fictional characters than they knew real humans (Liebert & Sprafkin 1988), and that study was from back before the advent of portable screens. Martin and Kazyak (2009) looked at the 20 top-grossing G-rated films for the years 1995 to 2005 (17 of which were from Disney, by the way). They report that:

1 Debuted April 16, 2016.
In a 2006 survey of more than 600 American mothers of three- to six-year-olds, only 1 percent reported that their child had not seen any of the films we analyze here; half had seen 13 or more [Martin, Luke, and Verduzco-Baker 2007]. (2009: 318)

One percent? But if you’re one of the many adults we know who has all the words to “Let It Go” memorized because your kid or grandkid insists on watching Frozen over and over, you’re probably less surprised than we were.

These films reach far and wide and not only that: their importance can extend far beyond a single screening. Kids don’t just see a movie once, talk about it over drinks, and go home. Kids obsess. Children are much more likely to rewatch the same pieces of media over and over (e.g. Mares 1998, cited in Martin & Kazyak 2009), and they also absorb characters into their lives in the form of toys, stories, and imaginary play. They use play to literally act out the narratives and social scripts they absorb, and in doing so, practice enacting social roles and values (see e.g. Wohlwend 2009). All this contributes to the claim that Giroux makes in his influential book The Mouse that Roared that children’s films “operate on many registers, but one of the most persuasive is the role that they play as the new ‘teaching machines’ . . . these films possess at least as much cultural authority and legitimacy for teaching roles, values, and ideals as do more traditional sites of learning, such as the public schools, religious institutions, and the family” (1999: 84).

This growing role of mass media in kids’ daily lives has been the subject of study (and concern) for grown-ups starting back in the 1970s. Scholars have produced an impressive body of literature on the influence of media consumption on children. We share below a few key insights from studies that have looked at gender roles specifically:

- Elementary school kids who watched more TV were more likely to have affinities for toys and clothes that reflected stereotypes about their gender (Frueh & McGhee 1975).
- Increased TV consumption was associated with increased acceptance of sex-role stereotypes throughout adolescence (Herrett-Skjellum & Allen 1995).
- Young girls who watched more feminine-coded “teen movies” tended to have more gendered (and negative) interpretations of peers’ behavior (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro 2008).
- Kids with higher media exposure were more likely to feel dissatisfied with their bodies: boys wanted to have buffer torsos, and girls wanted to lose weight (Ata et al. 2007; Coyne et al. 2016; Grabe et al. 2008).
- Girls who had higher media consumption were significantly more likely to develop habits or beliefs related to disordered eating (Ata et al. 2007; Grabe et al. 2008).

The research discussed here confirms that consuming more mass media significantly impacts viewers’ gender ideologies, usually moving views and...
behaviors to be more traditionally gendered, and in some cases, more harmful or toxic. No wonder Peggy Orenstein chose to name her bestselling 2011 book on so-called girl culture *Cinderella Ate My Daughter*.

**Disney’s Media Empire**

Having decided that we wanted to look at gender in children’s media, we immediately turned to Disney and Pixar. It is difficult to overstate the power that the Walt Disney corporation and its affiliates wield in our modern media landscape. In addition to its more well-known fare of branded movies, TV shows, live events, and theme parks, the Disney company has been steadily acquiring an astonishing amount of the media we consume, including the Fox network, National Geographic, ABC, FX Networks, Lucasfilm, Marvel Studios, and ESPN. Reading the full list of the company’s assets is a staggering experience, one which makes it slightly less surprising to learn that they...
pulled in $69.6 billion in 2019 alone, and were responsible for a full 30 percent of all film revenue earned in the US that year.2

The cornerstone of this massive media empire is, and has always been, feature-length animation. Disney currently produces films from two separate studios, Walt Disney Animation Studios and Pixar, and together they dominate the landscape of animated films both in the box office and in critical reception. Of the 10 top-grossing animated films of as of 2019, seven came from Disney/Pixar. (Frozen II took the top spot, previously held by, of course, the original Frozen). And it seems like their momentum is only building; in 2019 the studios’ major hits (Frozen II and Toy Story 4) took in $1.4 billion in ticket sales, outstripping every other animation studio in the market.

Disney and Pixar also hold a combined 15 of the 21 Academy Awards given for best animated picture since the award’s inception in 2001. Between the two studios, the Disney Corporation has a crushing presence in the world of children’s media that far transcends any of its competitors. Disney has built itself a reputation for being the gold standard of children’s cinema – a reputation that has been in the works since Disney’s first feature film in 1937.

Gender Ideology in the Magic Kingdom

The dominance of these studios isn’t inherently a bad thing. Disney and Pixar have some great messages about how we should tell the truth, be vulnerable with friends and family, stand up for what we believe in, and always give cooking rats the benefit of the doubt. The problem occurs when social factors become intertwined with more abstract moralizing in problematic ways. Children’s stories are short and they’re simple; they don’t have time for nuance or complicated character development. Kids (in the US at least) just don’t have that kind of attention span. So children’s media, and cartooning in particular, ends up relying on a lot of cultural shorthand to sketch in character and plot as quickly as possible (Lippi-Green 1997). We expect animation to be a fanciful mode of production, and we expect children’s media projects to be fast and fun, more than we expect them to be realistic. With those expectations comes a lot of freedom.

That freedom can be dangerous. In children’s media, animators are allowed and even encouraged to construct worlds that are dictated more by ideology than by reality. As animator Tim Burton explains:

Precisely because of their assumed innocence and innocuousness, their inherent ability – even obligation – to defy all conventions of realistic representation, animated cartoons offer up a fascinating zone with which to examine how a dominant culture constructs its subordinates. As non-photographic application of photographic medium, they are freed from the basic cinematic expectation that they create an “impression of reality” . . . (Burton 1992, cited in Lippi-Green 1997: 85)

2 We don’t have numbers yet on how 2020 affected them, but we’re also not super-worried.
The issue here is that the alternative to reality that is being created is almost always predicated on dominant social ideologies, many of which are harmful. Pandey argues that, as a result, movies tend to “uphold mainstream values by according positive attributes to characters who function as prototypes of the dominant culture, while simultaneously ascribing negative values to characters from non-mainstream social groups” (2001: 2).

Here is one specific example: the freedom from reality that children’s media enjoy allows Disney writers to set a movie like Aladdin in a fictional Middle Eastern city of Agrabah without necessarily having all or even any characters speak like they’re from a Middle Eastern country in the real world. They don’t need to speak an Arabic-influenced variety of English, much less actual Arabic. But mix that with common cultural stereotypes, and you end up with rough and mean background characters speaking with vaguely “Middle Eastern” accents, a fast-talking sidekick who speaks like a New York Jewish man, and the two romantic leads speaking like they’re from Southern California (Lippi-Green 2013). Intentionally or not, this leads audiences to link the (white, SoCal) standard variety of English with heroes, even in a Middle Eastern setting. As the creators pick and choose what they represent “realistically” and what to ignore or replace, they promote dangerous dominant ideologies.

We’re certainly not the first scholars to consider that Disney and Pixar are worth studying. Au contraire, we pick up this thread from a long line of researchers, coming from an impressive range of academic fields, from media studies to marketing to social work. And within that tradition, gender in children’s films has been a particularly hot topic, especially with respect to the Disney Princess movies.

In terms of ideologies around gender, previous research has documented how Disney embraces gender-stereotypical characters and behaviors. Numerous studies report that the female characters in Disney tend to end up in domestic and/or romantic roles, such as mother or wife (e.g. Lippi-Green 2013; Towbin et al. 2004), while male characters have more choices. Female characters also exhibit stereotypically gendered qualities such as:

- Passivity (Junn 1997)
- Helplessness (Towbin et al. 2004)

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3 Which they literally are: Linda Larkin (voice of Jasmine) was born and grew up in Los Angeles, and Scott Weinger (voice of Aladdin) was born in New York but moved to Los Angeles when he was young.

4 A sample of relevant fields on the list includes: media studies (e.g. Gillam & Wooden 2008; Junn 1997), gender studies (Brydon 2009; England et al. 2011; Martin & Kazya 2009), marketing (e.g. Cook & Main 2008; Wilde 2014), sociology (e.g. Forman-Brunell & Eaton 2009), psychology (e.g. Coyne et al. 2016), and social work (e.g. Towbin et al. 2004). Disney is the ultimate interdisciplinary field.
Male characters also conform to some unsurprising stereotypes, for example being shown as:

- physically strong/dominant (England et al. 2011; Towbin et al. 2004)
- assertive (England et al. 2011; Towbin et al. 2004)
- sexually aggressive (Junn 1997).

In other words, while Disney could take advantage of setting a film “under the sea” or in a mythical kingdom to try new things in the area of gender and gender roles, by and large, they don’t. They reproduce the same ideologies.

There is also some evidence that Disney may be specifically to blame for some of the attitudinal and behavioral effects on children that have been documented. As we’ll explain in Chapter 2, the 1990s created a lot of (rightful) concern about the gender lessons we teach young girls. It was at that point that scholars began looking at Disney Princesses, and they haven’t really ceased since.

One key study of Disney’s influence on children is Coyne et al. 2016. We appreciate this one particularly, because it was done longitudinally, to test the effects of exposure to the media in real time. The researchers report that:

Disney Princess engagement was associated with more female gender-stereotypical behavior 1 year later, even after controlling for initial levels of gender-stereotypical behavior. Parental mediation strengthened associations between princess engagement and adherence to female gender-stereotypical behavior for both girls and boys. (2016: 1909)

In other words, they found some good evidence that it is in fact not just entertainment; children who watched more of the Princess films were more likely to pick up gender-stereotypical behaviors. So whatever it is that children are seeing on the screen has measurable, real-world implications for how they understand and embody gender. That means that the language in these films is something we definitely need to know more about.

**Linguistics and the Media**

**Studying Language in the Media**

There have been multiple full-length works dealing exclusively with representation of various groups in Disney. Books like *The Mouse that Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence* (Giroux 1999; Giroux & Pollock 2010), *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture* (Bell et al. 1995), *Tinker Belles and Evil Queens* (Griffin 2000), and *Diversity in Disney Films: Critical Essays on Race, Ethnicity, Gender, Sexuality and Disability*
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(Cheu 2013) are examples of the many fine critical qualitative works that have been written in the past three decades. And that’s on top of the vast number of articles from many corners of academia that have weighed in. But despite all of this research, linguistics has yet to make a significant contribution to the topic of gender in children’s media – a fact we hope to change.

Linguists have historically been reluctant to use scripted media as a source of linguistic data because it’s “not real.” Sociolinguists, especially, have prided themselves on studying real people and communities, while looking askance at syntacticians who theorize about ideal speaker-hearers and spend their time considering hypothetical sentences like What was the thing you bought Mary a book and? that one is not likely to hear in the real world. Linguists who do venture into the world of media tend to do so by looking at unscripted film, like reality TV or political broadcasts (e.g. Mullany 2011; Sung 2012), which Queen points out is explained by the “assumption that the language of scripted, imagined media is somehow less authentic than either unscripted language in the media or real-life communication” (2015: 20). The goal of sociolinguistics is to describe how real people “do” things with language, based on how they wish to present themselves in a particular situation. So we expect that for many sociolinguists, the idea of conducting a sociolinguistic research project in which all of the speakers are fictional characters makes them understandably uneasy.

However, there is a growing body of work from scholars who believe that scripted media can be a rich source of linguistic data. Queen argues in her book Vox Popular (2015) that scripted media has vast untapped potential for analyzing social variation, both in terms of how variation contributes to characterization and narrative action, and in terms of how media assigns new social meaning to variation. Dynel (2013, 2015) similarly argues that language in scripted media shares enough in common with unscripted speech to be valuable, and that “fictionalized reality can reveal social processes more clearly than lived reality” (Coupland 2004: 258, cited in Dynel 2015: 339). Other scholars have backed this point up by showing the many similarities between scripted and unscripted speech (e.g. Culpeper et al. 1998; Quaglio 2009).

Some studies have gone even further and have begun to analyze social variables such as gender, ethnicity, and class as they appear in the media (e.g. Al-Yasin & Rabab’ah 2018; Fägersten 2016; Lauzen & Dozier 2002). Two interesting studies that apply some linguistic analysis to Disney specifically are Pandey (2001) and Lippi-Green (1997/2013). Interestingly, both of them focus on the use of standard vs. vernacular varieties of English.

Rosina Lippi-Green is the person who first brought the potential for studying Disney into the view of linguists as a chapter in her seminal book English with an Accent (1997/2013), and who inspired our own work. She showed that standard dialects of English correlate with “good” characters, whereas nonstandard dialects are usually used to voice villains or side characters. She also takes a
critical look at gender roles, albeit from a general, not linguistic perspective (e.g. focusing on job titles available to female characters). Pandey similarly looks at how characters who use a standard variety are granted more leeway in using strategies of rudeness than those who use a nonstandard variety, reinforcing the hierarchy of power between the two varieties.

These studies demonstrate that linguistics can reveal patterns in ways that other methods of critical analysis might miss. Pandey’s study, though, is wholly qualitative and based on individual scenes; Lippi-Green’s has quantitative elements, but on an extremely broad level (i.e. counting the number of characters with a given dialect). Our project takes all of this a step further by applying traditional sociolinguistic methods to media sources, to parallel studies of sociolinguistic variables in real-world communities. With these methods, we want to address what we would argue is a critical (and missing) piece of the puzzle: language and gender in children’s films. We are excited to take up this challenge, because we think our research can add some new and important viewpoints to the world of media analysis. We also hope to model methods for doing sociolinguistic analysis on speech communities that might include mermaids and talking teapots instead of ordinary humans. In our ideal world, great swaths of linguists and other social scientists would take up the baton and do this type of analysis more broadly on anything from movies that have won the Oscar for best picture, to bodice-ripper romance novels, to popular YouTube or TikTok videos.

Qualitative or Quantitative? Peanut Butter and Jelly

A linguistic approach to media analysis also provides a unique scope and scale of research. Most previous studies of Disney have used qualitative methods or quantitative methods (leaning towards the former) but not both. The qualitative analyses we have seen (and cited throughout this book) bring valuable insights, but are often limited in scope. Many researchers focus tightly on individual movies or scenes, or choose different movies to answer each question. We get a snapshot of something very interesting, interpreted through a particular disciplinary lens.

While these narrower viewpoints can provide an excellent level of detail, we also wanted to look for patterns beyond individual movies or Princesses, the types of patterns that can go undetected because they only matter when you zoom out and look at the whole picture (in our case, 80 years of filmmaking). Male characters talk more than female characters in a movie? Not a problem. But male characters talk more than female characters in all the movies? That would be something to think about. Doing large-scale quantitative work can allow us to take a broader view (including chronologically) with the questions we ask about a set of films. Then, when we turn to qualitative analysis, we will have a general context from which to ask more targeted questions.
On the other hand, the quantitative studies that have been done on children’s films span a broad range of movies and provide an interesting backdrop for tracking some general patterns in gender roles, particularly over time. Content analyses, e.g. England et al. (2011) or Hine et al. (2018), have documented a decrease in the proportion of some gendered behaviors in the most recent Princess films, for example. Again, they don’t look at language at all. But beyond that, these purely quantitative methods don’t provide a way to see how these behaviors actually function in context. In other words, they are missing the piece that is so critical in sociolinguistics: How are these behaviors (linguistic or otherwise) being used in the construction of an identity, specifically, for our interests here, a gendered identity?

We are prepared to address this question by combining quantitative and qualitative methodologies. This approach will allow our research to work at a scale that’s at once both very wide (covering 31 movies) and very granular (on the level of individual words), which can contextualize previous findings in new and interesting ways. We use the quantitative approach to look at the bigger picture: trends that hold over the entire set of films, or patterns that we see changing over time. How do the features we are analyzing work together to create an ideology about masculinity or femininity overall? We use a qualitative approach to focus in and see how these features are being used in a particular context, by a particular character, to create a particular type of gendered linguistic performance.

Our goal is for this book to provide a model for those who want to apply linguistic methodology to media analysis, particularly with the aim of (1) looking at relatively large groups of films or other media, while (2) combining quantitative and qualitative methods in fruitful ways, and (3) tracking the dissemination of hegemonic ideologies about gender, race, or other social categories.

Language and Gender

Constructing Gender through Language

Since gender is our focus here, and not everyone reading this book will have a background in language and gender, we want to provide a quick overview of some of the key concepts that form the basis of sociolinguistic theory in this subdiscipline. Historically, some of the models that have been proposed to account for gender-linked differences in language have included the following claims:

- Men’s language is the norm and women’s language is an inferior or deviant version of it (deficit model).
- Men and women come from different subcultures and have differing/opposed but equally valid ways of speaking, almost like two separate languages (two cultures model).