Language and Gender in Children’s Animated Films

Disney and Pixar films are beloved by children and adults alike. However, what linguistic messages, both positive and negative, do these films send to children about gender roles? How do characters of different genders talk, and how are they talked about? And do patterns of representation change over time? Using an accessible mix of statistics and in-depth qualitative analysis, the authors bring their expertise to the study of this very popular media behemoth. Looking closely at five different language features – talkativeness, compliments, directives, insults, and apologies – the authors uncover the biases buried in scripted language, and explore how language is used to construct tropes of femininity, masculinity, and queerness. Working with a large body of films reveals wide-scale patterns that might fly under the radar when the films are viewed individually, as well as demonstrating how different linguistic tools and techniques can be used to better understand popular children’s media.

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Language and Gender in Children’s Animated Films

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This work is dedicated to every young scholar out there who has a passion, especially queer folk, women, and people of color. Don’t let anyone tell you what you can or cannot do. And if you don’t think your idea is good enough or serious enough to be meaningful, take it from two grown women who have spent a decade watching Disney movies: it is.
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Preface

Real-World Tips from Auntie Carmen and Auntie Karen

This book did not come into existence by magic, or through some mysterious process that is kept highly secret in the towers of academia. We often treat academic books as if they are produced in an objective, detached way, like boxes of cereal on a machine-run assembly line that doesn’t really involve “people” at all. But academic authors are, in fact, verifiable people. We have lives and lived experiences, friends, mentors, pets, worries, hopes, like anyone else.

To that end, we have allowed our voices as individuals to come through in this book, more than is typical of academic writing. We believe that rather than weaken our authority, this approach strengthens it: we acknowledge who we are, what we think about, what angers or upsets us. There can be no real objectivity where humans and societies are involved, even in the presentation of facts and data that we hope will clarify and illuminate some aspect of the social sciences. So the best we can do is to be honest about where we’re coming from.

We also hope to demystify slightly for students and others the idea of writing a book, which can seem daunting and alien, especially to those who come from marginalized communities or other social spaces where the academic world seems like a very far off place.

Over our years of conducting the research for this book, lots of things other than the book took place in our lives: Karen began as an undergraduate student, then got a Master’s degree, and became a co-author. Carmen’s husband was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s and later passed away. Karen moved to Chicago, began a new job, and experienced the end of a long-term relationship. She got a cat.

We received a contract from Cambridge toward the end of 2019. In March 2020 we got together to make a definitive plan for finishing each chapter on time, with Karen flying out to California. As we were working through our plan, a frightening new virus emerged in the world, and the country began to shut down. People overbought toilet paper. Karen scrambled to change her travel plans and fly home. In Minnesota, a police officer knelt on George Floyd’s neck for nine and a half minutes. People marched, around the country...
and around the world. For most of the late summer and fall, California, where Carmen lives, was on fire. Climate scientists released increasingly dire predictions.

There were times when we stopped and thought about the fact that the world was definitely. Not. Ok. It felt strange to be moving ahead, writing this book about cartoons, as so many unprecedented and alarming events were taking place around us. We kept writing, though. We asked for, and received, an extension on our original deadline. We agreed to be compassionate toward ourselves and each other. We had moments, individually and collectively, when we were discouraged, felt inadequate. We struggled. But we were also incredibly fortunate to be on a team, with each other and with an extended group of people who supported and encouraged us.

That’s how the book came to be. It’s not a secret. But as much as it was a challenging, arduous, and ultimately very human process, we still feel blessed by having met each other and by the friends, family, colleagues, collaborators who supported us through this process. So actually, maybe there was a little bit of magic, when you think about it.
Because this project has been the result of a decade of work, we find ourselves with a decade’s worth of people to thank. Though we cannot possibly hope to recognize every person who has made this project come to life, we do want to call out some in particular.

Firstly, we have had many assistants who have helped with collecting and analyzing data over the years. This book has almost 10,000 hand-collected speech tokens (!) and we couldn’t have done it without them. Thanks to all of them, and to the Pitzer Research and Awards, Doman, and Davis research funds that helped us employ them:

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There are also many peers, editors, and mentors who have helped us create and strengthen our work. Thanks to Robin Dodsworth, Agnes Bolonyai, and Richard Shafranek for help in conceiving our analytical approaches, both qualitative and quantitative; Mary Paster and Robin Queen for help with our proposal; Armand deAsis and Rupert Deese for their assistance in automating some of our more tedious tasks; Lindsey Brinkworth, Katie Conner, Ari Janoff, Emily Pearl, Robin Queen, and Emily Safford for their valuable feedback during editing. Thank you to our anonymous reviewers for careful consideration of our manuscript. And a special thanks to Brendan Ly and Olivia Landgraff for helping us bring it over the finish line by polishing, standardizing, tracking down references, and just generally being cheerful and awesome even when we were a mess.
xvii Acknowledgements

As is traditional, we absolve anyone we’ve thanked here of responsibility for any of our mistakes. The nice thing about being co-authors is that we can just each blame the other for any big screwups. We hope there aren’t any, but just in case.

Of course, a huge thanks to Cambridge University Press for publishing our work, and to Andrew Winnard and Izzie Collins for working with us.

We also appreciate beyond measure those who have supported us emotionally through this process, past and present. Carmen wants to thank her awesome friends, especially the ones who provided food (Angela, Mita, Yolanda) or advice (Cliff, haley, Kathy, Louis, Mark, Patti) or took her to Disneyland (Monica and Mario). Also her mentors, John Rickford and Walt Wolfram, who taught her that you can be an academic and also a damn good person. And finally and forever, John Fought. *El amor nunca muere.*

Karen wants to thank her parents for always being supportive of her, and the many mentors over the years who helped her learn, including the faculty at Pitzer College and NC State, especially Carmen, for believing in her and giving her such an incredible opportunity. She also wants to thank Emma, Erin, Allison, Emily, Grae, Sara, Lindsey, and all her loved ones near and far who helped make 2020 into a year of surprising growth and community. And a special thank you to Richard, for lending his gentleness, creativity, connection, and coziness to her little Chicago studio.

Lastly, to our readers, thank you! More so than ever in this world of ubiquitous technology, we know you have choices about what to read, and so we are grateful and humbled that you picked our book.