

Disney Magic Becomes a Little Less Magical and a Little More Discriminatory

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Storytelling is a crucial part for humankind as well as in oral history. Movie adaptations have also become a key ingredient in relaying certain messages to people of all ages. However, children watching movies and absorbing stories are susceptible and systematically exposed to a standard (or specific) language ideology by means of linguistic stereotypes in films and television shows. These types of media specifically, provide a wider view on people of different races or nationalities to children (Green, 1997). Disney films, for instance, are superficially cute, innocent and lighthearted, but through a deeper analysis, the details of Disney movies provide, a severe, and discriminating image. Some of the major problems with Disney is the appropriation and reinterpretation of stories and legends with the lack of consideration to its significant meaning and importance to specific cultures. (Green, 1997). Most animated Disney films can be portrayed as stereotypical and discriminatory, unconsciously leaving an impression in the development of a child's mind. Contrasted qualities of a character(s) help to differentiate and determine who is "good" and "evil". However, their accents are always a clear indication of their true behavior and intention. In *The Little Mermaid*, for example, dialects range from Ariel's Standard American accent, to the French accent spoken by the evil Chef, and Sebastian's Jamaican accent. However, the association of these accents correlate to the characters, thus invoking false stereotyping in young children who watch these films. Specific Disney animations, like *The Lion King*, *Aladdin*, *Pocahontas* and *Tarzan*, clearly exemplify how characters' dialects can negatively influence younger audiences; causing them to unconsciously construct judgments based on the associations between characters' accents and behaviors or roles in the films (Wenke, 1998). The variations of accents create a clear distinction between heroes and villains and generate derogatory stereotypes, emphasizing and critiquing the people who have those accents in real life.

Children try to interpret and reason about race at an early age. For some children, stereotypes can be difficult to differentiate between fact and fiction, especially in films made for children, like Disney. Stereotypes can affect children in various ways ranging from negative interracial exchanges, affecting their academic ability and causing them to mimic these stereotypes resulting in false representations of cultures (McKown and Strambler, 2009). When watching most Disney movies, the villains are almost always characterized with a dialect that is not the Standard American accent. Accents play a critical role in movies, as it inflicts stereotypes towards a specific group of people who have those accents in the real world. The

majority of Disney films often bequeath the antagonist of the storyline with a non-American accent, exemplified by Shere Khan's British accent in *The Jungle Book*. The protagonists of the films, like Mowgli in *The Jungle Book*, are almost always portrayed with the Standard American accent. It has been a common pattern within Disney's animated features that characters who speak with non-Standard American accents are portrayed as outsiders, and are selfish and corrupt with the desire to seek or obtain power. This analysis is clearly displayed in one of Disney's most popular animated feature films, *The Lion King*. In this Hamlet-inspired tale, the main characters' accents bring attention to which characters fall into the "good guy" versus "bad guy" stereotype. Simba, the prized protagonist in the film, and Nala, his love interest, both speak Standard American dialects. Through linguistic production, Simba's portrayal as the Lion King translates an underlying message to children viewers that characters who are portrayed as heroes or heroines are those who show more flexibility in adapting to the standard English (Soares, 2017). If children are capable of assimilating stereotypical attitudes in regard to certain dialects, than the more they watch animated films with this specific language casting, the more negative their language attitudes become concerning speakers of a non-standard mainstream American accent.

In contrast to Simba, *The Lion King's* hero, Scar, Simba's jealous and wicked uncle, speaks in a heavy British dialect and is created to look scary, ugly, and devious. Children who are watching may associate the British accent with Scar's behaviors and actions while comparing them to the justified and moral actions of Simba. The choice of a British accent for Scar is intended to highlight his snobbish mannerisms and his feelings of intellectual superiority compared to the rest of the African animals, thus amplifying stereotypes linked to British accents (Wenke, 1998). This then creates a label on British people, portraying them as outsiders and who see themselves as superior to others. This association correlates to other characters in the film, as the Hyenas speak in Latino and African American accents. They are portrayed not only as malevolent, but are seen as foolish, laughable, and simple-minded servants to Scar. For viewers, this implies that African American and Latino people are not as important in comparison to American or "white" sounding people. This portrayal of linguistic racism highlights the illusive racial prejudices Disney movies exude.

Not only are non-American dialects associated with characters who are outsiders and possess mal intent, but it is also linked to characters who tend to be overbearing and takes away the "fun" out of things by creating boundaries. Zazu, Mufasa's bird friend and right-hand advisor, speaks in a British accent like Scar. He lays strict rules for Simba and Nala to obey for their own safety. Zazu is essentially shown as a "party-pooper" in the midst of Simba and Nala's fun. While it is a subtle behavioral difference in contrast to Scar, it still

illustrates that people with non-American accents are, in most cases, disliked. *The Lion King* is one of many Disney classics that carry this underlying discriminatory aspect and lay a foundation for non-Standard English prejudices.

In the popular Disney film that attempts to relay a version of a major culture, but falls short, is *Aladdin*. *Aladdin* also exercises the Standard American dialect to portray the hero and main characters, Aladdin and Jasmine, who are also both visually appealing to the eye. Jasmine has exaggerated curves and features, and Aladdin has toned and masculine features. When these images are associated with the American accent, children and possibly adults, connect these characteristics to the accents the characters have. This again, gives the connotation that someone can only be important, successful, and beautiful if they speak in an American sounding accent. Despite the setting of the film being in an Arabic mythical desert kingdom, Jafar, the villain, has a British accent. There is no reason for any character in the film to speak with a British accent, and thus one must assume it is done for an intended effect, similar to the choice of a British accent for Scar. Whatever is the reason for choosing a British accent for these characters, it highlights the association between the British accent and the villainous characters of Scar and Jafar, and may encourage children to ethnocentrically discriminate against people who have these accents in real life (Wenke, 1998). Along with the greater intellect and villainous ways that is connected to a British dialect, Jafar and the Sultan are outsiders in the film. They are viewed as subordinate characters compared to Aladdin, Jasmine and Genie due to their characterization and accent. In the Disney animated movie, *Pocahontas*, this theme of American accented heroes and British villains carries on.

Pocahontas and John Smith both have the Standard American accents, despite John Smith being from Britain and Pocahontas being a Powhatan Native American woman. Pocahontas, a historical figure and romanticized Disney heroine is aesthetically pleasing to the eye like Jasmine, with beautified, striking features and long sleek hair that every young girl wishes they had. John Smith's sharp features and blond hair embellish him as well and only enhance the stereotype that American accented people are more beautiful and attractive than non-American accented people. Ratcliffe, the evil, literal gold-digger who is in charge of the English expedition, has a thick British accent and is overweight and ugly. This furthers the stereotype that British accented people believe themselves superior, are selfish and appear to be anything but pleasing. Some of these stereotypes, however, are hidden more subtly in other Disney classics, such as *Tarzan*.

A film that characterizes animals with voices produces a harder stereotype to conjure in regards to the accents the animals have. In the jungle setting of *Tarzan*, Kara, Tarzan's gorilla mother, has a Standard American accent and is loving and kind to her adopted human son. Tarzan also has a Standard American accent and is consistently portrayed as a hero. Tarzan's American accent and his robust and muscular features accentuate him as the important character of the film due to the stereotypes these characteristics are associated with. However, Jane, his love interest, is British and she is anything but evil. She is not a hero, but has no ill-intent towards Tarzan and his adoptive family. In contrast, Clayton, the antagonist of the film, is also British, but his motives, as mentioned before with Scar and Jafar, are selfish and corrupt as he tries to kidnap Tarzan's gorilla family. The only stark similarity between Jane, Clayton and Jane's father is that they are all outsiders. They are strangers to Tarzan and the jungle environment, portraying them as odd and alien-like. This highlights the fact that Disney portrays non-American accented people as outsiders.

The fact remains that Disney holds a strong rein in producing popular, and widely accepted films, as it is the most prominent company who relies on reputation and nostalgia to deliver a message (Green, 1997). Storytelling is for people of all ages and cultures and it is critical to deliver a message that is unbiased and not discriminatory. Disney still continues to produce stereotypes with their sociolinguistic choices in their films. Nevertheless, with growing sensitivity among cultures, Disney has done their homework in recent movies to portray characters' cultures in their most accurate representation, like in the recent film *Moana*, as well as breaking down social stereotypes as seen in the film *Zootopia*. Despite its derogatory linguistic ideology in past films, Disney has released movies that deflect from its past linguistic stereotypes. For example, in the animated and live-remake of *Beauty and the Beast*, the antagonist Gaston, has an standard-English accent rather than the foreign accent that most Disney villains have been portrayed with. To add, all five of the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films portray Jack Sparrow, the protagonist, with a British accent and not the standard-English accent that most Disney heroes have. These two films suggest that Disney does not depict all characters in certain manners solely based on accent. To clean the smear of sociolinguistic prejudice from their name, Disney may need to carefully create character dialects in future movies to resemble their culture and geographic location rather than their statuses and roles in films.

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