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5 Teaching children how to discriminate

What we learn from the Big Bad Wolf

All official institutions of language are repeating machines: school, sports, advertising, popular songs, news, all continually repeat the same structure, the same meaning, often the same words: the stereotype is a political fact, the major figure of ideology.

Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (1975)

In 1933, while the US was in the depths of a severe depression, Walt Disney's animators created a short cartoon which would make an \$88,000 profit in the first two years of its release (Grant 1993: 56). Perhaps this figure is not so surprising, given the statistics of the time: by 1930 there were some 20,000 motion-picture theaters in business, serving 90 million customers weekly (Emery and Emery 1992: 265). Thus the first filming of *Three Little Pigs*, a familiar story with a message of hard work in the face of adversity, was widely seen. The theme of good triumphing over evil was clearly a timely and popular one, and it is one that has not gone out of favor: this cartoon is still shown with regularity, in part or whole, on Disney's cable television channel.

One of the topics which is often discussed in relation to this particular Disney animated short is a scene included in the original release, in which the wolf – in yet another attempt to fool the pigs into opening the door to him – dresses as a Jewish peddler (Grant 1993, Kaufman 1988, Precker 1993b). He has a hook nose, wears sidelocks and a dark broad-rimmed hat similar to one worn by some Orthodox Jews, carries his wares before him, and contrives a Yiddish accent.¹ Kaufman recounts that it wasn't until the film's re-release in 1948, fourteen years later, that Disney re-animated the scene in which the Wolf appears as a Jew. This step was taken in response to communications from the Hays Office, which brought the issue of Jewish sensibilities to Disney's attention.² Grant reports that Disney later admitted that the original scene was in bad taste (1993: 54); nevertheless, only the offending visual representation was changed, and much later (at a date never specified clearly), "in case the Yiddish dialect of the original scene might itself be found offensive, the dialogue was

changed as well. Now the Wolf spoke in a standard 'dumb' cartoon voice" (Kaufman 1988: 43-44). Even when the wolf no longer appeared Jewish, he spoke with a Yiddish accent, thus maintaining the underlying message based in anti-Semitism and fear of the other: a link between the evil intentions of the wolf and things Jewish. Grant also relates that the newer animation and dialogue still leaned on more general stereotypes and fears: "the disguised wolf no longer has Hebraic tones or mannerisms, instead saying: 'I'm the Fuller brush-man. I workin' me way through college.' The syntax alone belies that statement" (1993: 54).

Sixty years later, a similar controversy would arise over the portrayal of characters in Disney's *Aladdin*, a movie set in a mythical Arabic kingdom. An offending line of dialogue in an opening song, "Where they cut off your ear if they don't like your face / It's barbaric, but hey, it's home," was partially changed in response to complaints from the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (AAADC), but as the representative of the AAADC pointed out, the accents of the characters remained as originally filmed. The representative

particularly objected to the fact that the good guys - Aladdin, Princess Jasmine and her father - talk like Americans, while all the other Arab characters have heavy accents. This pounds home the message that people with a foreign accent are bad.

(Precker 1993a)³

Is there truth to this supposition? What are children to take away from the Big Bad Wolf, and from brutal Arabian palace guards? Is it significant that they see bad guys who sound a certain way, look a certain way, and come from a certain part of town or of the world? Is this a part of how children learn to assign values on the basis of variation in language linked to race, ethnicity, and homeland? To make this point, it would first be necessary to demonstrate regular patterns which are available to children on a day-to-day basis, for as Silverstein (1992) asserts, "we are faced first-off with indexical facts, facts of observed/experienced social practices, the systematicity of which is our central problem: *are they systematic? if so, how?*" (322).

This chapter is about the sociolinguistic aspects of the systematic construction of dominance and subordination in animated films aimed at children.

It is first observably true that somehow, children learn not only how to use variation in their own language, but also how to interpret social variation in the language of others. They do this with or without exposure to television and film, but in the current day, few children grow up without this exposure. The 1995 *World Almanac* reports that 98 percent of all US households, or some 94.2 million homes, have television sets; of these, 79 percent own video cassette recorders and 63 percent subscribe to basic cable. As seen in Figures 5.1 and 5.2, when children are not in front of

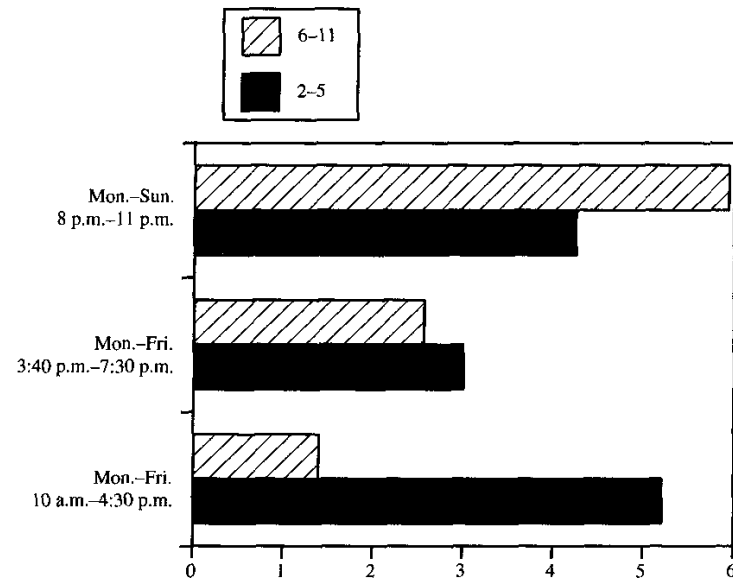


Figure 5.1 Average hours per week children watch television, by time period and two age groups

Source: 1995 *World Almanac and Book of Facts*

the television set, they are avid consumers of the products of the movie industry; in 1992 over 15 million seats were occupied by children under the age of 2; those between 6 and 11 double this number.

For better or worse, the television and film industries have become a major avenue of contact to the world outside our homes and communities. For many, especially for children, it is the only view they have of people of other races or national origins.

In traditions passed down over hundreds of years from the stage and theater, film uses language variation and accent to draw character quickly, building on established preconceived notions associated with specific regional loyalties, ethnic, racial, or economic alliances. This shortcut to characterization means that certain traits need not be laboriously demonstrated by means of a character's actions and an examination of motive. It also means that these characterizations are culture- and period-bound; in this, films have much in common with fiction, and the representation of our cultures and our selves is equally worthy of study.

It must be noted at the outset that it is not my intention to condemn out of hand all use of abstraction in entertainment film, or even

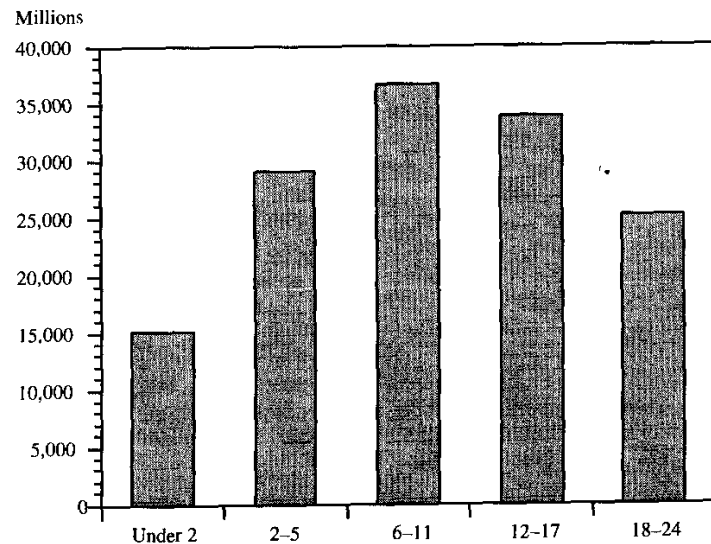


Figure 5.2 Movie theater attendance calculated for the year 1992, by age
Source: Mediamark Research 1993, vol. P13

particularly in cartoons. Some stereotyping may be inevitable. Whether or not all stereotyping has negative repercussions is a matter of interpretation; here I hope to show that while the practice is sometimes mild and no obvious or direct harm follows from it, there are always repercussions. For that reason alone, it would be good to be more generally aware of the way stereotypes function in film directed at children.

TALKING THE TALK

Any actor necessarily brings to a role his or her own native language. In many cases, the variety of English is irrelevant to the characterization and can be left alone. Often, however, the director or actor will target a particular social, regional, or foreign accent of English, perhaps because it is intrinsic to the role and cannot be sacrificed. US audiences may or may not suspend disbelief when Robin Hood speaks with a California accent, but it would be harder to cast someone with an upper-class British accent as any of the recent US presidents and not do serious harm to audience expectations and reception.

In a similar way, non-native speakers of English who come to the US to make films necessarily bring their L2 accents to their work. This

accent may restrict the roles they can play, or they may have roles written or rewritten to suit the immutable nature of their accents (Arnold Schwarzenegger, Gérard Depardieu, Sophia Loren, and Greta Garbo provide examples). Actors undergo accent training of various kinds in an attempt to teach them to imitate what they need for a particular role, although we have seen that even with expensive and careful tutoring not all actors are equally capable of this task, even in the limited way it is asked of them during filming (see the discussion of the Sound House in Chapter 2).

What is particularly relevant and interesting in this context, however, is the way that actors *attempt* to manipulate language as a tool in the construction of character, whether or not they are successful. Educational programs for the training of actors for stage and screen often include classes on speech, dialogue, and the contrivance of accent. If it is possible to fool some of the people some of the time, it is still necessary to learn the skill behind this trick.

The materials used in these courses are interesting in and of themselves, because the approach often includes not just the mechanics and technicalities of one particular regional or foreign accent, but also issues of content and approach.

Dialect actors must avoid going so far with certain speech traits that they end up creating ethnic or linguistic stereotypes . . . language or dialect background does not dictate character actions. Characters with accents must have the same range of choices available to them as characters whose speech is identical to yours.

(Karshner and Stern 1990: Preface)

This is an enlightened and realistic position, certainly. Other materials prepared for actors are not always so even-handed, as seen in *Foreign Dialects: A manual for actors, directors and writers* (Herman and Herman 1943), a volume still in print:

The Cockney Dialect: . . . The typical Cockney is often a brash little fellow. He is an inveterate heckler, and some of his favorite victims are the soap-box orators in Hyde Park. His speech is usually nasalized, possibly because of adenoid trouble which is quite prevalent in the British Isles. Often, his dialect is delivered in a whine . . . there is always a slovenliness to the pronunciation.

(19)

The Swedish Dialect: . . . the Swedes are usually more light-hearted than their Scandinavian cousins, more interested in the joys of living and eating. The Norwegians, on the other hand, are likely to be more solid and serious. The Swede likes conviviality, and the Norwegian solitary, lonely contemplation.

(295)

The Polish Dialect: . . . [Poles] are religious – especially the women – and devoutly Catholic. The Pole is industrious and will not shy from the hardest labor in the steel mills, foundries, and other heavy-duty jobs. He is a pleasure-loving person and it is this quality that leads him into the extremes of conviviality. He is not what may be called a thinking man . . . he is slow to thought, slow to speech, and slow to action.

(351)

Sometimes, the contrivance of accent appears a logical and reasonable dramatic strategy. Often stories about people who come to the US from other countries lean hard on accent to establish the origin of the character (Al Pacino's Cuban-accented English in *Scarface*; Nick Nolte's Italian-accented English in *Lorenzo's Oil* or Marlon Brando's in *The Godfather*; the range of attempted Swedish accents in *I Remember Mama*). For films set in the southern US, actors are often coached long and hard on the acquisition of a second variety of US English (Vivien Leigh in *Gone with the Wind*); sometimes the attempt is not made at all (Clark Gable, Leslie Howard, and other men in the same movie).

Perhaps most interesting, a director often requires actors to use accents as a signal that the action and dialogue would not be taking place in English. Thus, in a Nazi concentration camp in *Schindler's List*, the commanding officer (Ralph Fiennes, who is British) speaks English with a contrived German accent to alert viewers to the fact that he would, in fact, be speaking German. There is a long list of filmed stories in which dialogue would not logically be taking place in English. Such films include *Schindler's List* (German and Polish, as well as other eastern European languages), *Papillon*, *Dangerous Liaisons*, *Impromptu*, and *Gigi* (French), *Diary of Anne Frank* (Dutch), *The Good Earth* (Chinese), *Fiddler on the Roof* (Yiddish, Russian), *All Quiet on the Western Front* (German, French), *Dr. Zhivago* and *Gorki Park* (Russian), *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (Spanish), *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (Czech, French). Here accent becomes a signal of place and context rather than a means to quickly convey character. In such a case, it would make most logical sense to have *all* actors contrive the same French or Russian or Chinese accent.⁴

Rarely, however, is this policy consistent. In most movies, live action or animated, where accent is used as a cue to place, only some characters will speak with a contrived accent. Many possible reasons for this come to mind: Perhaps this is because not all actors are equally capable of targeting the required accent, or of temporarily disguising their own. Perhaps the director prefers no accents to partial or unbelievable ones. Or perhaps, in some cases, accent is used as a shortcut for those roles where stereotype serves as a shortcut to characterization. Actors contrive accents primarily as a characterization tool, although there is sometimes supplementary motivation in establishing the setting of the story. Below,

I will consider exactly when certain accents are contrived, and perhaps more important, when mainstream US English (MUSE) is considered acceptable, or even necessary. To do this, we will consider one body of animated film in detail.

ANIMATED FILM

In animated film, even more so than is the case with live-action entertainment, language is used as a quick way to build character and reaffirm stereotype:

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 convey an “impression of reality.” . . . The function and essence of cartoons is in fact the reverse: the impression of irreality, of intangible and imaginary worlds in chaotic, disruptive, subversive collision.

(Burton 1992: 23–24)

There are patterns in the way we project pictures and images of ourselves and others which are available to anyone who watches and listens carefully. A study of accents in animated cartoons over time is likely to reveal the way linguistic stereotypes mirror the evolution of national fears: Japanese and German characters in cartoons during the Second World War (Popeye meets the “oh so solly” Japanese fleet), Russian spy characters in children's cartoons in the 1950s and 1960s (Natasha and Boris meet Rocky and Bullwinkle, or “beeg trrrouble forrr moose and squirrrrrrel”), Arabian characters in the era of hostilities with Iran and Iraq. In the following discussion of systematic patterns found in one specific set of children's animated film, the hypothesis is a simple one: animated films entertain, but they are also a way to teach children to associate specific characteristics and life styles with specific social groups, by means of language variation.⁵ To test this hypothesis, 371 characters in all of the available Disney full-length animated films were analyzed.

DISNEY FEATURE FILMS

On the surface it is quite obvious that Disney films present young children with a range of social and linguistic stereotypes, from *Lady and the Tramp's* cheerful, musical Italian chefs to *Treasure of the Lost Lamp's* stingy, Scottish-accented McScrooge. In order to look more systematically at the way Disney films employ accent and dialect to draw character and

Table 5.1 The Disney films

1938	<i>Snow White</i>	1963	<i>The Sword in the Stone</i>
1940	<i>Pinocchio</i>	1967	<i>The Jungle Book</i>
1941	<i>Dumbo</i>	1970	<i>The Aristocats</i>
1941	<i>The Reluctant Dragon</i>	1977	<i>The Rescuers</i>
1942	<i>Bambi</i>	1981	<i>The Fox and the Hound</i>
1950	<i>Cinderella</i>	1986	<i>The Great Mouse Detective</i>
1951	<i>Alice in Wonderland</i>	1989	<i>The Little Mermaid</i>
1952	<i>Robin Hood</i>	1990	<i>Treasure of the Lost Lamp</i>
1953	<i>Peter Pan</i>	1990	<i>The Rescuers Down Under</i>
1955	<i>Lady and the Tramp</i>	1991	<i>Beauty and the Beast</i>
1958	<i>Sleeping Beauty</i>	1992	<i>Aladdin</i>
1961	<i>101 Dalmatians</i>	1994	<i>The Lion King</i>

stereotypes, it was necessary to analyze all released versions of full-length animated Disney films available.⁶

This body of animated films was chosen because the Disney Corporation is the largest producer of such films, and they are perhaps the most highly marketed and advertised of the field (Disney total advertising budget for 1992 was \$524.6 million, some significant portion of which was spent directly on feature and animated films). Here I consider only full-length feature films (generally between one and a half to two hours in length) and specifically exclude short features, cartoons, and compilations of shorts grouped together for thematic reasons. Only fully animated films were included in the study, excluding those that combine live-action sequences with animation (*Song of the South*, *Three Caballeros*). Animated film created for an adult audience (the wartime film *Victory through Air Power* is one example) were also omitted. All characters with speaking roles of more than single-word utterances were included in the analysis.

A total of twenty-four films were viewed multiple times.⁷ Each of the 371 characters was analyzed for a variety of language and characterization variables. The detailed linguistic description for each character consisted of a mix of phonetic transcription, quotes of typical syntactic structures, and marked lexical items. In cases where an actor is clearly contriving an accent, a decision was made as to what language variety was most likely intended to be portrayed. That is, a poorly imitated British (or other foreign) accent was still counted as such for the creators and (most) viewers. For example, in *Aladdin*, one of the minor characters, a thief, speaks primarily mainstream American, but also has some trilled *r*'s – definitely not a feature normally associated with American English. This character's accent was still classified as mainstream American, however, since only one atypical feature appeared in his phonology. Another character whose speech exhibits features from two or more dialects is Cogsworth, the butler/clock in *Beauty and the Beast*. He speaks with a

contrived British accent in which some American features crop up unpredictably; thus, though it is not an accurate imitation of a middle- or upper-class British dialect, for the purposes of this study it must be classified as such.

After a brief consideration of the findings of the quantitative analysis more generally, I will concentrate on three aspects of language use in Disney films. These are the representation of African Americans; the way that certain groups are represented (particularly lovers and mothers); and finally, using French accents as a case study, the way that even positive stereotyping can be negative and limiting.

The whole mouse and nothing but the mouse

Of the 371 characters with speaking roles in the twenty-four movies examined, 259 or 69.8 percent are male. Female characters make up the other just over 30 percent. A look at the way female and male characters are deployed, overall, indicates that within the proportions established, they are equally distributed as major and minor characters. Female characters are almost never shown at work outside the home and family; where they do show up, they are mothers and princesses, devoted or (rarely) rebellious daughters. When they are at work female characters are waitresses, nurses, nannies, or housekeepers. Men, conversely, are doctors, waiters, advisors to kings, thieves, hunters, servants, detectives, and pilots.

It is certainly and demonstrably the case that the universe shown to young children in these films is one with a clear division between the sexes in terms of life style and life choices. Traditional views of the woman's role in the family are strongly underwritten, and in Disney films, whether they are filmed in 1938 or 1994, the female characters see, or come to accept, their first and most important role in life as that of wife and mother. What does an examination of language use have to add to this observation? What do characters, male and female, speak?

For the most part (43.1 percent) they speak a variety of US English which is not stigmatized in social or regional terms, what has been called MUSE throughout this study. Another 13.9 percent speak varieties of US English which are southern, or urban, or which are associated with particular racial, ethnic, or economic groups. Mainstream varieties of British English are spoken by 21.8 percent (Figure 5.3).

While 91 of the total 371 characters occur in roles where they would not logically be speaking English, there are only 34 characters who speak English with a foreign accent. The tendency to use foreign accents to convey the setting of the story is confirmed by these distributions: there are twice as many characters with foreign-accented English in stories set in places like France and Italy.

The Lion King, set in Africa, is certainly a case of a story in which the logical language would not be English. This is acknowledged, indirectly,

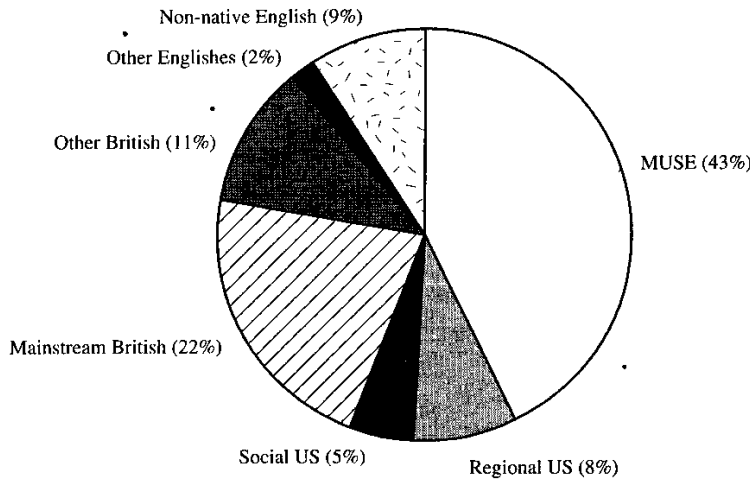


Figure 5.3 371 Disney animated characters by language variety used

in the names of the characters, many of which are derived from Swahili. The good-natured but dumb warthog is called Pumbaa, or *simpleton*; Shenzi, the name of the leader of the hyena pack, means *uncouth*. However, the only character who actually uses traces of Swahili and a contrived Swahili accent is Rafiki (Swahili, *friend*), the wise and eccentric baboon who fulfills the role of spiritual guide.

Figure 5.3 indicates that some 90 percent of all the characters speak English natively, with an American or British English accent. However, Figure 5.4 makes it clear that 60 percent of all the characters appear in stories set in English-speaking countries; thus, a significant number of English-speaking characters appear in stories set abroad (sometimes these are "Americans abroad" as in Donald Duck in search of treasure; sometimes these are characters who are not logically English speaking, given their role and the story, as in all the characters in *Aladdin*). In Figure 5.5 three *language settings* are considered: stories set in English-speaking lands, those set in non-English-speaking countries, and finally, those set in mythical kingdoms where it would be difficult to make an argument for one language or another as primary (*The Little Mermaid*, for example, at times seems to be in a Mediterranean setting). Since a contrived foreign accent is often used to signal that the typical or logical language of the setting would not be English, it is not surprising to see that the highest percentage of characters with foreign-accented English occurs in the second type of language setting. But it is also significant that even more

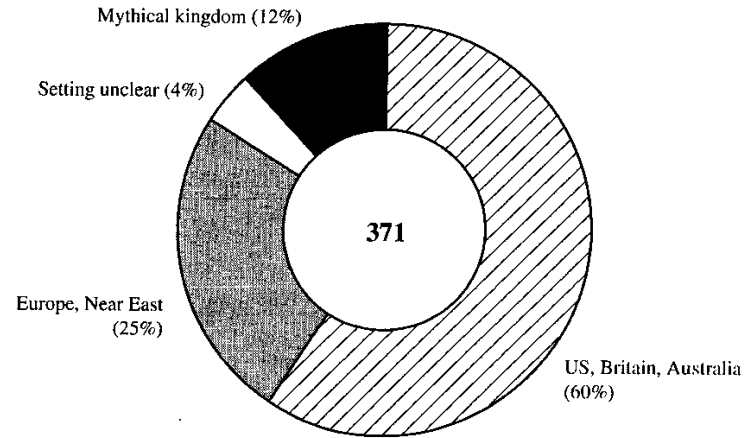


Figure 5.4 371 Disney animated characters by story setting (percentage figures rounded up)

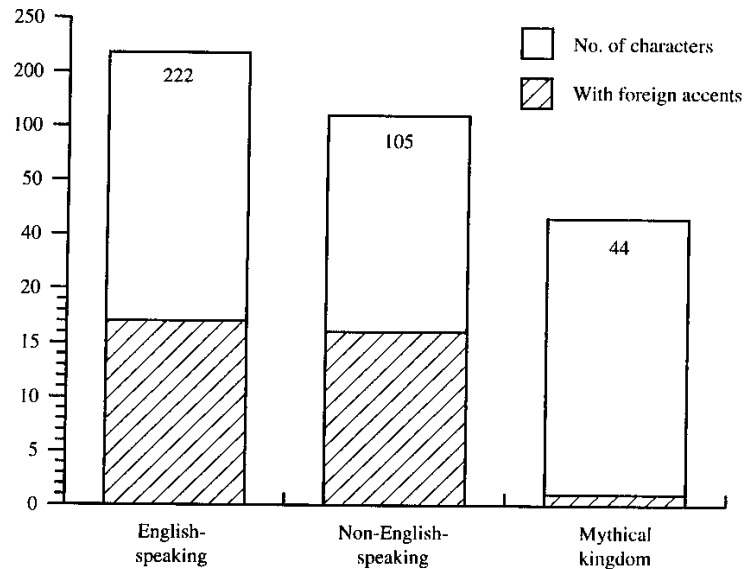


Figure 5.5 371 Disney animated characters by language spoken in the country in which the story is set, and the number of characters with foreign-accented English

Table 5.2 371 Disney animated characters by major language group and evaluation of character's actions and motivations^a

	Motivations				Total %
	Positive	Negative	Mixed	Unclear	
US	122	33	11	42	208 56.1
British	53	28	11	37	129 34.8
Foreign	10	11	6	7	34 9.2
Total	185	72	28	86	371
%	49.9	19.4	7.5	23.2	100.0

characters with foreign accents appear in stories set in the US and England.

The breakdown of characters by their language variety becomes interesting when we examine that variety in relationship to the motivations and actions of the character's role. Disney films rely heavily on common themes of good and evil, and with very few exceptions they depend also on happy endings. Characters with unambiguously positive roles constitute 49.9 percent of the total; those who are clearly bad or even evil, only 19.4 percent. The remainder are divided between characters who change significantly in the course of the story (always from bad to good) and those characters whose roles are too small and fleeting for such a judgment to be made (86, or 23.2 percent of the total), as seen in Table 5.2.

Female characters are more likely to show positive motivations and actions (Figure 5.6). Unlike male characters who sometimes are bad and then become good, bad females show no character development.

The pie chart in Figure 5.7 would first seem to indicate that there is no relationship between non-native English accents and the portrayal of good and evil. There are 72 characters who are truly bad, in major and minor roles. They include the poacher and would-be child-murderer Percival McLeach in *The Rescuers Down Under* with his contrived southwestern accent and idiom ("purty feather, boy!" "I whupped ya'll!" "Home, home on the range, where the critters 'r ta-id up in chains"), and the whip-and-cleaver wielding Stromboli of *Pinocchio*, with his threats of dismemberment, incredible rages, and florid, contrived Italian accent. Of these evil 72, however, a full 85 percent are native speakers of English; almost half are speakers of US English. Bad guys with foreign accents account for only 15 percent of the whole.

Taken in context, however, the issue is more complicated. In Figure 5.8, which compares positive, negative, and mixed motivations (the marginal characters have been removed for the sake of this discussion) by major

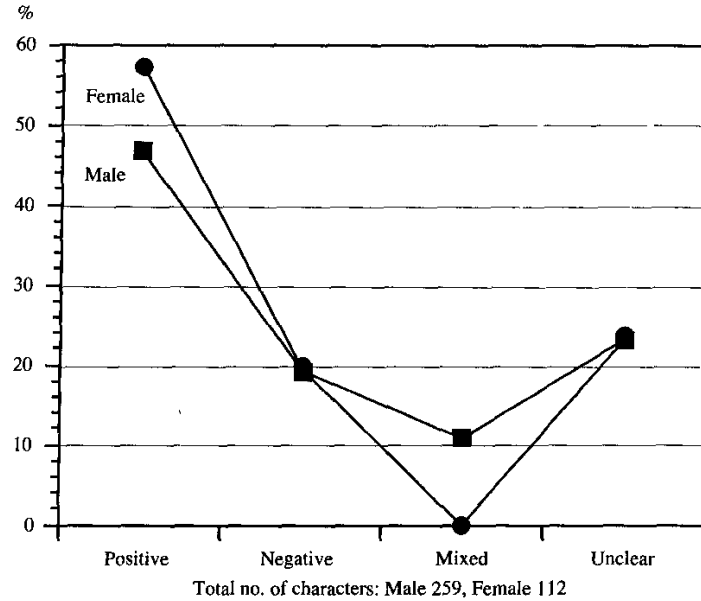


Figure 5.6 371 Disney animated characters by gender and evaluation of actions and motivations

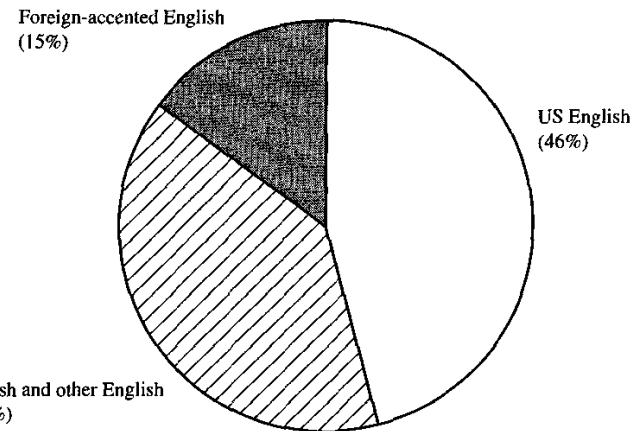


Figure 5.7 72 Disney animated characters with negative motivations and actions, by major language group

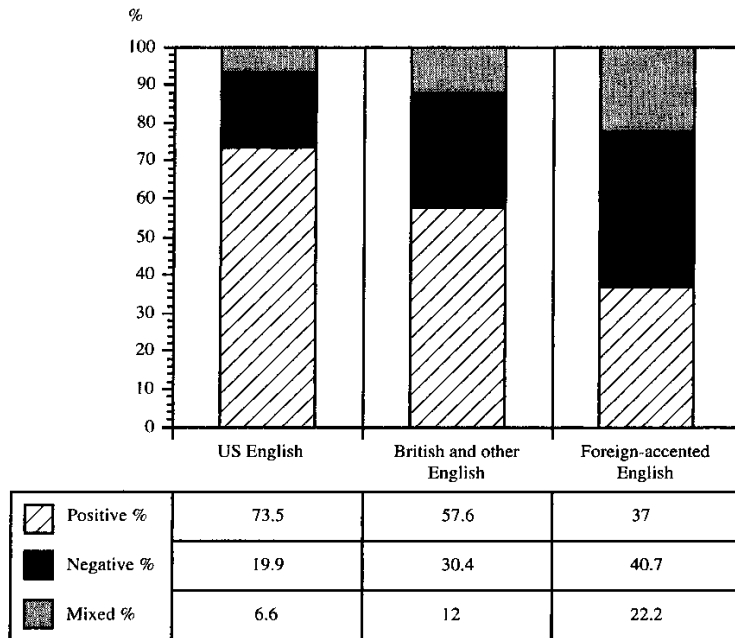


Figure 5.8 285 Disney animated characters of positive, negative, or mixed motivations and actions, by major language group

language groups, it becomes clear that the overall representation of persons with foreign accents is far more negative than that of speakers of US or British English. About 20 percent of US English speakers are bad characters, while about 40 percent of non-native speakers of English are evil.

Additional interesting patterns come forward when we examine the representation of specific languages linked to national origin, race, or characterization.

Beasts and beauties.

With the 1967 release of *The Jungle Book*, the relationship between voice, language, and characterization entered a new realm in Disney film. This was the first feature in which actors were cast on the basis of voice recognition. Actors and musicians who had already established a personality and reputation with the movie-going public were drawn, quite literally, into the animation and storytelling process. This strategy was not greeted with enthusiasm by all film critics:

Animating full-bodied, expressive characters is what men like Thomas, Kahl, Johnston and Lounsbury do best. Other artists provide a handsome backdrop and add dazzling animation effects. But breathing heart and soul into a film is not so easily accomplished. *The Jungle Book* lacked this quality, and substituted for it a gallery of characters whose strongest identity was with the stars who provided their voices. The animators enjoyed working with people like George Sanders, Louis Prima, and Phil Harris, and incorporated elements of their personalities into the animated characters. Audiences naturally responded, so the animators felt justified in continuing this practice. "It is much simpler and more realistic than creating a character and then searching for the right voice," [producer] Reitherman contended.

(Maltin 1987: 74–75)

This additional complication to the use of accent and dialect in the building of character and stereotype is relevant to a discussion of the representation of African Americans by means of language in Disney films.

Especially in more recent years, Disney has engaged African American actors to provide the voices of major characters in their animated films. Sometimes these actors speak MUSE, as is the case with James Earl Jones speaking the role of the father in *The Lion King*. Sometimes they fluctuate between MUSE and AAVE, drawing on rhythmic and lexical items for dramatic and comic effect. This is the case with Whoopi Goldberg's performance as one of the evil hyenas, also in *The Lion King*. Sometimes these actors seem to be using their own variety of English with little embellishment, as was the case when Pearl Bailey spoke the part of Big Mama in *The Fox and the Hound*. Table 5.3 gives an overview of all the characters in these films who use, to a greater or lesser extent, AAVE. Additional AAVE-speaking characters seem to have flitted in and out of the abduction scene in *The Jungle Book*; however, they were not included in the analysis because the speaking roles were too small to be sure of the variety of English used. It needs to be stated quite clearly that this list does not represent the sum total of all African Americans who had speaking roles in the movies examined, but only those who chose or who were directed to use AAVE for a particular part.

While the 161 MUSE speakers appear in proportions of 43.1 percent humanoid, 54.4 percent animal and 2.5 percent inanimate creatures (such as the talking teapot in *Beauty and the Beast*), all AAVE-speaking characters appear in animal rather than humanoid form. Given the low overall number of AAVE speakers, however, it is hard to draw any inferences from that fact. The issue is further complicated in that every character with a southern accent appears in animal rather than humanoid form. Further examination of unambiguously positive and negative characters indicates that a full 43.4 percent of 90 characters in human form show

Table 5.3 Disney animated characters who use AAVE part or all of the time

Name	Actor (where credits available)	Humanoid or animal	Film	Role evaluation	Typical language of setting
Dandy	Cliff Edwards	crow	<i>Dumbo</i>	Mixed	English
Fat	Jim Carmichael	crow		Mixed	English
Glasses	Hall Johnson	Choir		Mixed	English
Preacher		crow		Mixed	English
Straw Hat		crow		Mixed	English
King Louie	Louis Pima	primate	<i>Jungle Book</i>	Mixed	Hindi*
Big Mama	Pearl Bailey	owl	<i>Fox and Hound</i>	Positive	English
Scat	Scatman Crothers	cat	<i>Aristocats</i>	Mixed	French
Shenzi	Whoopi Goldberg	hyena	<i>Lion King</i>	Negative	Swahili*

*The category "typical language" is based on the country in which the story is set. Most of the movies are set in the US, thus the typical language is English. *The Jungle Book* is set in India, and *The Lion King* in Africa. The typical languages of these stories could be any one of many native languages spoken in those places; I have chosen one of the many possible languages in such cases.

negative actions and motivations while only 18.6 percent of the 156 animal characters are negative.

Perhaps more disturbing than the issue of human versus animal form is the way in the world which is cast so clearly for those African Americans who are speakers of AAVE. The stereotypes are intact: the male characters seem to be unemployed or show no purpose in life beyond the making of music and pleasing themselves, and this is as true for the crows in *Dumbo* as it is for the orangutan King Louie and his crew of primate subjects in *The Jungle Book*. Much has been made of King Louie and his manipulation of the only human being in this story; singing in the scat-style made popular by African American musicians, he convinces his audience that he has one goal in life, and that is to be the one thing he is not: a human being, a man. African American males who are not linguistically assimilated to the sociolinguistic norms of a middle and colorless United States are allowed very few possibilities in life, but they are allowed to want those things they don't have and can't be.

The two female characters are also controversial, but for very different reasons. Pearl Bailey's Big Mama must be seen as a stereotype of the loving, nurturing mammy, but one with a mind of her own. Whoopi Goldberg, who voices the part of one of the hyenas in *The Lion King*, slips in and out of AAVE for comic and dramatic effect. It must be noted that she is the only African American actor to do so in this film, a film which included – for Disney – an unusually high number of African Americans. We never hear AAVE from James Earl Jones as the King. None of the characters, whether they speak MUSE or AAVE, show any

clear connection to things African, with the exception of the wise baboon, Rafiki, who occupies a special but peripheral role in the film's story.

In general, children who have little or no contact with African Americans are exposed to a fragmented and distorted view of what it means to be black, based on characterizations which rest primarily on negative stereotype linked directly to language difference.

Lovers and mothers

Romance is a major plot device in many of Disney's animated films. Of the twenty-four stories examined here, thirteen depend in part or whole on the development of a relationship between a male and a female character which has not to do with friendship, but with love and mate selection. Those characters who are young and in potential search of a mate or love interest provide some of the most interesting material in these films overall. There has been much commentary in the popular press on the physical portrayal of young men and women in extreme and unrealistic terms, for both sexes. Doe-eyed heroines with tiny waists and heroes with bulging necks and overly muscular thighs have been roundly criticized, with little effect. There is little or no discussion of the *language* spoken by lovers, however.⁹

In spite of the setting of the story or the individual's ethnicity, lovers speak mainstream varieties of US or British English (Table 5.4), with some interesting exceptions. Of the male characters in Table 5.4, only two can be said to be logically and certainly speakers of US English: Bernard, who

Table 5.4 Lovers and potential lovers in Disney animated films

Language variety	Film	Male	Female
Mainstream US	<i>Beauty and the Beast</i>	Gaston The Beast	(no mate) Belle
	<i>Rescuers</i>	Bernard	—
	<i>Rescuers Down Under</i>	Bernard	—
	<i>Cinderella</i>	Prince Charming	Cinderella
	<i>Sleeping Beauty</i>	Prince Philip	Aurora
	<i>Little Mermaid</i>	Prince Erik	Ariel
	<i>Snow White</i>	Prince	Snow White
	<i>Lion King</i>	Simba	Nala
	<i>Lady and the Tramp</i>	—	Lady
	Socially marked US	<i>Lady and the Tramp</i>	Jock
<i>Aristocats</i>		O'Malley	—
Non-US English	<i>Robin Hood</i>	Robin Hood	Maid Marion
	<i>Rescuers Down Under</i>	Jake	(no mate)
	<i>101 Dalmatians</i>	Pongo	Perdita
		Roger Radcliff	Anita Radcliff
Foreign-accented English	<i>Rescuers</i>	—	Miss Bianca
	<i>Rescuers Down Under</i>	—	Miss Bianca
	<i>Aristocats</i>	—	Duchess

appears twice (*The Rescuers* and *The Rescuers Down Under*), and Jock (*Lady and the Tramp*). All the other characters would be speakers of British or Australian English, or of languages other than English. The languages of the four princes (from *Cinderella*, *Snow White*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *The Little Mermaid*) are debatable: the Disney version never specifies where these magical kingdoms are located (whether in the country of the story's origin or elsewhere).

Two of the male romantic leads speak socially marked varieties of US English: in *The Aristocats*, O'Malley (voiced by Phil Harris, a popular entertainer and singer of his day and cast on the power of voice recognition) does nothing to change or disguise his own English, which is rich in those characteristics which are often thought of as "working class" (simplified consonant clusters, double-negative constructions, and other stigmatized phonological and grammatical features). This is also the case with Jock from *Lady and the Tramp*. Both of these characters are prototypical rough lovers, men with an edge who need the care and attention of good women to settle them, and both are rewarded with such mates – females who speak non-stigmatized varieties – because they prove themselves worthy. There are no male romantic leads with foreign accents.

There is even less variation among the female romantic leads. There are no rough, working-class equivalents of O'Malley and Jock. In fact, of the seven females who speak MUSE, only one is an unambiguous case of a character who would logically speak US English: Lady of *Lady and the Tramp*. The use of a typical or logical language for the part and background of the character is clearly less important in this case than a consistent portrayal of an ideal lover and potential mate which stresses the lack of "otherness."

However, there are two female characters (one of whom occurs in two movies, *The Rescuers* and *The Rescuers Down Under*) with foreign accents, but they are both voiced by the same woman, Eva Gabor. The Gabor sisters were widely known and recognized in US culture in the 1950s and 1960s for their glamor and demanding behavior in many highly publicized affairs with rich men. They were recognizable on the basis of their Hungarian accents, and they brought with them a set of associations about sexually aware and available females that resulted in typecasting. The roles that Eva Gabor voiced for Disney were thus of elegant, demanding, and desirable females, and could be seen not so much as characters with foreign accents as one of the Gabor sisters in full costume. Perhaps Disney's hope that the public would associate the character on the screen with the public image of the actress voicing the part overrode more logical considerations. It was noted by at least one critic, however, that it made little sense to have the character of *The Aristocats'* Duchess, a pure-bred Persian cat living in France, speaking with a Hungarian accent.

Table 5.5 The language of mothers and fathers in Disney animated films

Language	Mothers	Fathers
MUSE	15	8
Socially marked US	0	0
Regionally marked US	0	1
Mainstream British	2	8
Socially or regionally marked British or other English	2	4
Foreign-accented English	1	1

To be truly sexually attractive and available in a Disney film, a character must not only look the idealized part, but he or she must also sound white and middle-class American or British.

In a similar way, mothers and fathers are most likely to have mainstream accents of US or British English, again with some interesting exceptions. As seen in Table 5.5, only two of these characters speak English with a foreign accent, although what would follow logically from the story setting is that eleven of these mothers and fathers would not be native speakers of English. Another thirteen characters appear in stories where the logical language might or might not be English. This applies particularly to the retelling of fairy tales in magical kingdoms (*Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Little Mermaid*).¹⁰ The two foreign accents which are evident are Gepetto's (contrived) Italian-accented English in *Pinocchio*, and once again Eva Gabor as the glamorous Duchess in *The Aristocats*. The only US-English-speaking father character with an accent which might be stigmatized is Gramps of *The Rescuers*, who is part of a larger group of stereotypical southerners with contrived accents.

Eva Gabor's voicing of the Duchess is the only instance in any of the movies where a mother takes on a romantic lead. Otherwise, in Disney movies parenthood and romance do not intersect. However, there are a great number of single-parent families overall. Of the twenty mothers, nine are widows or become widows in the course of the story, or have no husband in evidence; five are step- or substitute mothers and are unmarried; and in two cases the question of paternity is never raised, perhaps because it could not be answered in a way Disney considered suitable for children's entertainment. This is the case in *The Aristocats*, but more particularly in *The Lion King*, where Mufasa is the undisputed dominant male of his pride, and would thereby have fathered both Simba and Nala, who grow into adulthood and become mates. The fathers, in a similar way, are often widowers or simply without wives: this is the case for eleven of the twenty-two.

There are few married couples with major roles in any film. Mr. and Mrs. Darling make only small appearances in *Peter Pan*, which is also the

case for the mother and father in *Lady and the Tramp* and for Colonel Hardy and his wife Winifred in *The Jungle Book*.

Perhaps most interesting is the fact that mothers who speak non-US varieties of English have a little more latitude in social and regional variation in their language. This may be because the non-mainstream varieties of British English are not poorly thought of by US English speakers, who do not distinguish, for the most part, between stigmatized varieties of British English (Geordie, Midlands, Cockney, etc.) and those with more social currency.

Lovers in Disney films marry, and sometimes at a very tender age. But young or middle-aged married couples with growing families are seldom if ever seen. And while young lovers are presented in idealized form both physically and linguistically, in later life stages these same kinds of characters are not quite so narrowly drawn. The picture of motherhood portrayed in these animated films excludes careers and work outside family and home, and clings very closely to language varieties associated with middle-class norms and values. When seen at all, mothers are presented without a hint of ethnicity, regional affiliation, color, or economics. Fathers, often comic or droll characters, have in their language (as in work, preoccupations and interests) a wider set of choices available to them.

Francophilia Limited

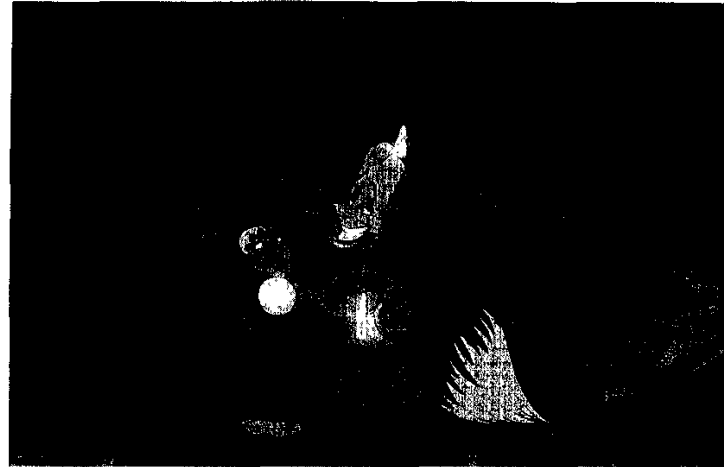
It is not hard to elicit stereotypes of the French, because this is not a national origin group which is seen in negative terms. Because there are good – or neutral – things to say, it is perhaps easier to say them:

despite, or possibly because of, their civilized natures, the French people retain a childish eagerness for fun and frivolity as well as for knowledge. There is an impishness about many of them which is captivating. They are curious, like most children, and this curiosity leads them into experimenting with such things as piquant sauces for food . . . it can be said of the French . . . that when they are good, they are very, very good – but when they are bad, they are – Apaches.

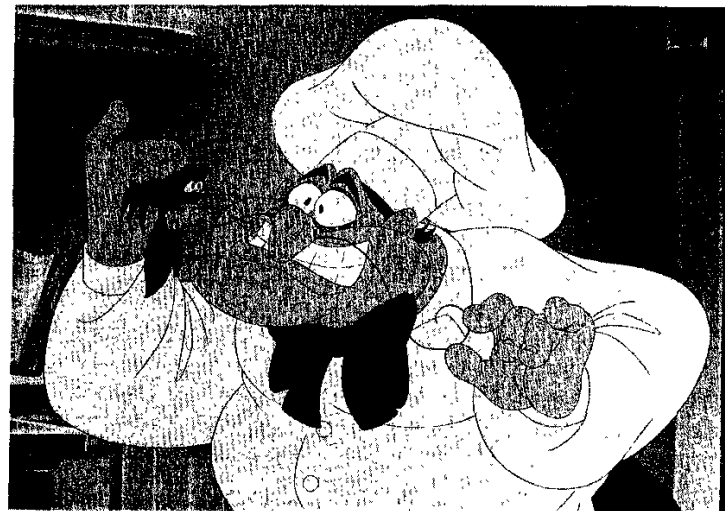
(Herman and Herman 1943: 143)

Aside from the clearly racist final comment which has to do not with the French, but with a Native American tribe, this view of the nation is not overtly negative. It is condescending, certainly, and narrow, but it does not call France a nation of idiots or a kingdom of evil (as the Herman and Herman volume does not hesitate to do in other cases).

There are two films which are set directly in France: *The Aristocats* and *Beauty and the Beast*, with a total of thirty-eight characters appearing in both stories. There is a wide range of characterizations, excessively evil and good, moody, generous, silly, drunken. Male characters include lawyers,



Lumiere and Feather Duster from Walt Disney Pictures' animated feature *Beauty and the Beast*; © Disney Enterprises, Inc.



Sebastian and Louis from Walt Disney Pictures' animated feature *The Little Mermaid*; © Disney Enterprises, Inc.

Table 5.6 Characters with French-accented English in Disney animated films

Setting	Character	Role	Film
France	Lumiere	maitre d', steward	<i>Beauty and the Beast</i>
	Stove	chef	
	Cherie	chambermaid	<i>Aristocats</i>
	Unnamed	milkman	
	Unnamed	chef	
Elsewhere	Louis	chef	<i>Little Mermaid</i>
	Unnamed	waiter	

aristocrats, barkeepers, vagabonds, inventors, booksellers, hunters, and servants. *Beauty and the Beast* takes place in an active, busy rural village; *The Aristocats* primarily in Paris. There are children and old people, lovers and villains. Of all these thirty-eight very diverse characters, all of whom would logically be speaking French, there are a total of five who indicate this by contriving a French-accented English. In other films, two additional characters appear with French accents, as seen in Table 5.6.

Of these seven characters, one is female (Cherie, a feather duster), and her primary purpose seems to be as a romantic foil for the character Lumiere; her only line, having been pursued behind the draperies by him, is "Oh no! I've been burnt by you before!" There are other beautiful and charming women and girls in *Beauty and the Beast*, but none of them are coquettish, and none of them have French accents. The subtle but unmistakable message is quite a simple one: there may logically be thirty-eight characters before us who are French, but the truly French, the prototypical French, are those persons associated with food preparation or presentation, or those with a special talent for lighthearted sexual bantering. If a personality is established at all, there are two basic personality types available to them: irascible (the chef in *The Little Mermaid*, and his counterpart in *The Aristocats*); and the sensual rascal.

Is this a terrible picture to give children? After all, there are no truly "French" – linguistically, culturally, truly French – characters who are criminal, who threaten children, who are lazy or conniving. But there are also no French who are surgeons, rock singers, who teach school or drive a cab, or who are elderly. Rich people and aristocrats, in France or elsewhere, speak with British accents no matter what their logical language. The domain of life experience for things French is as narrow, if not as overtly negative, as that for AAVE speakers.

The cultural stereotypes for specific national origin groups are perpetuated in a systematic way in these stories created for, and viewed primarily by, children.

Summary

Close examination of the distributions indicates that these animated films provide material which links language varieties associated with specific national origins, ethnicities, and races with social norms and characteristics in non-factual and sometimes overtly discriminatory ways. Characters with strongly positive actions and motivations are overwhelmingly speakers of socially mainstream varieties of English. Conversely, characters with strongly negative actions and motivations often speak varieties of English linked to specific geographical regions and marginalized social groups. Perhaps even more importantly, those characters who have the widest variety of life choices and possibilities available to them are male, and they are speakers of MUSE or a non-stigmatized variety of British English. These characters may be heroes or villains, human or animal, attractive or unattractive. For females, on the other hand, and for those who mark their alliance to other cultures and places in terms of language, the world is demonstrably a smaller place. The more "negatives" a character has to deal with (gender, color, stigmatized language, less favorable national origin) the smaller the world. Even when stereotyping is not overtly negative, it is confining and misleading.

THAT'S ENTERTAINMENT

Disney films are not the only way in which we perpetuate stereotypes on the basis of language. The manipulation of language variety and accent to draw character is an old tool, but it is seldom a completely benign one. Stereotyping is prevalent in television programming and movies: situation comedies (*Beverly Hillbillies*, *I Love Lucy*, *Sanford and Son*, *All in the Family*, *Molly Goldberg*, *American Girl*, *Ma and Pa Kettle*, *Green Acres*, *Andy Griffith*) in particular provide numerous examples, which need to be examined more closely.

Language and accent as symbols of greater social conflict are also found in serious dramatic efforts, on television and film. The 1993 film *Falling Down* provides a disturbing example. In that film, a middle-class worker portrayed as beleaguered by inner-city life loses his temper with an irascible convenience-store clerk; the episode begins when the protagonist asks the price of an item. The following is from the script:

The proprietor, a middle-aged ASIAN, reads a Korean newspaper . . . the Asian has a heavy accent . . .

ASIAN: eighdy fie sen.

D-FENS: What?

ASIAN: eighdy fie sen.

D-FENS: I can't understand you . . . I'm not paying eighty-five cents for a stinking soda. I'll give you a quarter. You give mc seventy "fie"

cents back for the phone . . . What is a fie? There's a "V" in the word. Fie-vuh. Don't they have "v's" in China?

ASIAN: Not Chinese, I am Korean.

D-FENS: Whatever. What differences does that make? You come over here and take my money and you don't even have the grace to learn to speak my language . . .

(Smith 1992: 7-8)

Here, accent becomes a very convenient and fast way to draw on a whole series of very emotional social issues, and all of them in a spirit of conflict, from immigration and the rights and responsibilities thereof, to greater issues of dominance and subservience, race and economics. The scene is very believable; many have had or observed such exchanges. The protagonist, clearly a man on the edge of socially acceptable behavior, is also portrayed as someone pushed to that edge by the pressures of inner-city life. He is overtly cruel and condescending and racist; but, somehow, he is also seen as not completely wrong.

In this film, a foreign accent becomes the signal of what has gone wrong with us as a nation, and his dismay and his anger, while excessive, are cast as understandable. From Charlie Chan to this owner of a corner store, our understanding of Asians – all Asians – has been reduced to a series of simple images. They are inscrutable, hard-working, ambitious, intelligent but unintelligible people, and they make us uncomfortable. I will return to the way that Asians and Asian-accent English are perceived in Chapter 11.

Even films which are made specifically for the purpose of illuminating and exploring racial and other kinds of social injustice are not free of the very subtle effects of standard language ideology. A close examination of Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993) shows a great deal of consistency in the use of accent: "The accents of individuals reflect their position in World War II Poland. That is, German characters are given – by and large – German accents, and Jewish characters generally possess Yiddish accents" (Goldstein 1995: 1). Even here, however, the suppression of variation for some characters has been noted, this time falling along lines not of color or religion, but of gender. In an initial exploration, Goldstein found that the more sexually available and attractive a female character was, the less distinctive her accent.

Following this pattern, the German women who were wives and mistresses – and therefore the most sexually available women in the movie – did not have strong German accents [while] the older and less attractive Jewish women had heavier and thicker Yiddish accents . . . linguistic accent seems to be part of what is deemed attractive about [some] women.

(1995: 6)

These patterns held true for males as well: conservative Jews had stronger Yiddish accents; the worst of the prison guards, brutish Nazis, had the heaviest German accents (ibid.). It seems that even the highest standards in film making cannot be free of the social construction of language. And perhaps there is nothing that can or should be done about this process in its subtlest form. It is, after all, part of the social behavior which is of interest to art as the representation of the human condition.

What children learn from the entertainment industry is to be comfortable with *same* and to be wary about *other*, and that language is a prime and ready diagnostic for this division between what is approachable and what is best left alone. For adults, those childhood lessons are reviewed daily.