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## **He Said, She Said: A Critical Content Analysis of Sexist language used in Disney's *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and *Mulan* (1998)**

By Shakira Begum<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

This study looks at how Disney princess films perpetuate sexist tropes through language. By focusing on both feminism and linguistics, it uses an interdisciplinary approach underpinned by data analysis and media criticism. This paper uses a content analysis study of *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and *Mulan* (1998) to look at Disney's role in shaping representations of women, and how this representation has shifted within the decade of the release of these two films. This paper answers the question: in what ways does language in media perpetuate sexist tropes; more specifically, how has the language of male characters in media perpetuated misogyny. The content analysis looks at aspects of gender representation by grouping female and male characters separately in three observable categories. These are: the number of characters speaking more than 50 words of dialogue, the percentage of dialogue spoken by each gender, and the total number of sexist expressions used by each gender. Sexist language is further categorised in two parts. The first is discriminatory language used by men about women, and the second is discriminatory language used by women about men.

Data analysis shows that there are more male characters than female characters; male characters make up more of the spoken dialogue and male characters use more sexist language than female characters. This paper argues, that although Disney has come a long way in making the female characters independent and strong on their own, they fail to identify the main problem of female representation, which is language used by males. In using feminist critical theory to criticise the two adaptations, this paper identifies the ways media perpetuates gender discrimination through language, propagating the subjugation of women, and how this has not changed in the decade between the release of the two films.

*Keywords:* Gender, Discrimination, Feminism, Language, Disney, Mulan, The Little Mermaid

### **Introduction: Feminism, Language & Disney**

Different groups of feminists—radical, liberal, cultural, Marxist—work towards unique goals within the feminist agenda and have made valuable contributions to the lives of women as well as society at large. Some of these contributions include getting women the right to vote, giving them equal access to education, returning their right to make reproductive decisions, and allowing them to initiate divorce. One other key agenda for feminists has been to challenge and change the way women are discriminated through language. This change seeks to re-order, re-evaluate, and re-direct language to less discriminatory and more inclusive modes of communication. Language which is inherently androcentric, is broken down and studied by feminists and linguists to determine how they impact our lives and how they need to be reformed.

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<sup>1</sup> Shakira Begum was born in London (1998). She completed two projects whilst at City University of London and was awarded a BA degree in English. The former was a spoken word project on mental health and the latter is the topic of this article. When she's not criticising language, she's learning it. These languages include: Japanese, Bengali, and Arabic. She is currently studying a degree in RE and is qualifying for a PGCE in English. "He Said, She Said" explores female subjugation and is informed by her experiences as an ethnic minority Muslim female.

One example of androcentrism in language up until the 1980's was the generic use of the masculine pronoun when speaking about a population that also included females, such as 'mankind', 'men', and 'he', despite there being more appropriate terms of use, such as 'humankind' and 'people'. Feminists and linguists have spent decades analysing language and have as a result, shed light on these types of usages, and have shown how using language in this way reflects the way our society uses speech to marginalise women by giving them a second-class status. It was through feminist and linguistic advocacy that language has evolved in usage, one example being the use of 'Ms' instead of 'Mrs' or 'Miss'. Where the term 'Miss' and 'Mrs' carry connotations of a female's marital status, the term 'Ms' is independent of a female's relationship to her male partner.

Language does not just begin and end in our dictionary. One of the central concerns for feminists in literary and film studies has been the portrayal of women in books, films, and media.<sup>2</sup> This paper will be pressing the view that sexist language in film is a strategically used power play by an androcentric society which works just as any other form of discrimination: to redistribute power unevenly to the sexes.

Disney is at the forefront of cinema, supplying generation after generation of children with tales of bravery, role models, and songs. Psychological research into behaviour studies such as Bandura's child aggression study, has shown that children learn through observing and imitating the behaviour of others, especially when actions are rewarded. They imitate and make role models of those with high status, attractiveness, and with whom they identify. The study showed that these behaviours did not need to be made face to face but could also be viewed and learnt through a screen<sup>3</sup>. Disney films are targeted at impressionable children, who according to Bandura's study, learn behaviour from watching models—such as the prince and princess characters. These characters are impressionable teachers for children learning language and the stereotypes that often come associated with it.

Sexist language is not just language that is used to discriminate against a certain sex, but rather the term will be used in this paper to refer to any language or expression that may perpetuate a stereotypical or negative view about a sex. For example, a phrase may be considered sexist or stereotypical if it indicates that a character or gender is being commanded to carry out an act against their will or an act is being forced upon them without their consent (i.e., 'Silence! You will do well to teach your daughter to hold her tongue in a man's presence'<sup>4</sup>). Here, the speaker is using their status as a male to assert authority over a female. The language used is a 'direct command', which strips away the female's power to speak and ignores her identity as an individual by speaking to her indirectly through her father. Other examples of sexist language used to code behaviour in the study can be found in 'Table 1: Operational Definitions and Examples of Stereotypical & Sexist Language'.

Robin Lakoff suggests that women have been socialised to speak in a way different from men; that female speech is identifiable through certain markers, and that speaking in this way denies them access to power. She identifies these markers—such as hedges, empty adjective, and tag questions—in her work and further explains what she calls the politeness principle as the foundation for female speech. This is the way females interact and follows three maxims: don't impose; give the receiver options; make the receiver feel good.<sup>5</sup> However,

<sup>2</sup> Mills, Sara, "Introduction," in *Language and Sexism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 1–34. Henceforth known in text as [Mills 2008].

<sup>3</sup> Cara Flanagan et al, *AQA Psychology* (Gloucestershire: Illuminate Publishing, 2016), p. 74-75. Henceforth known in text as [Cara 2016].

<sup>4</sup> 'Mulan', dir. by Tony Bancroft, Barry Cook (Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 1998). Henceforth known in text as [Mulan 1998].

<sup>5</sup> Robin Tolmach Lakoff, *Language and Woman's Place*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 39-102. Henceforth known in text as [Lakoff 2004].

her theories of female speech and the politeness principle, focuses solely on women being their own barriers to power and is not the only way in which women are oppressed. Men also use language strategically to subvert the power of women through silencing them and not giving them a chance to respond.

Previous research on language and film has shown similar findings. Research into language has been narrowly focused on usage of specific linguistic terms and percentage of speech, instead of phrases used by the characters, and more specifically by the male characters speaking about females. Other forms of feminist film analysis include the Bechdel Test, a theory developed in the 80s which evaluates films and fiction for the level and content of women characters' speech. However, this test looks specifically at what female characters speak about and omits the speech of male characters. Research like this has been reproduced many times. But it is apparent after conducting this study that it is not the way in which women speak about themselves that oppresses them; it is what men say about women that continues to subjugate them to oppression and objectification. Therefore, what my research is proposing is that instead of looking at the speech of female characters, to create changes in language, we should be assessing male speech instead.

This study will be looking at two Disney films. The first is *The Little Mermaid* (1989)<sup>6</sup>, based on the fairy tale by Hans Christian Andersen, and follows the main character, Ariel, a young mermaid who yearns for a human life above the sea. To achieve her goal, she makes a deal with Ursula the sea witch and trades her voice for legs. Ultimately, in the end, with the help of her family and friends, she defeats the evil sea witch and is granted a human life by her father, Triton, gains the love of her prince, Eric, and lives happily ever after.

The second movie was released almost a decade later. *Mulan* (1998) follows the story of Hua Mulan who takes her father's place in the imperial army, disguised as a man in a quest to defeat the Huns and keep her identity a secret. She succeeds in the former, but in the pivotal moment of the film, her identity is revealed. Exposed as a female, she is turned away from the army, only to return to save her comrades and her country and gain true love, just as her family wanted.

Both stories follow lead female characters who delve into an unknown world, fight against fate, and come out victorious. What do these films say beyond their plots? In *Mulan* (1998), Mulan succeeds in defeating the Huns, but to do this she gives up her femininity and takes on the male role of 'Ping'. In *The Little Mermaid* (1989), Ariel could only be a part of Eric's world once she gave up her beautiful singing voice. In both films, the female characters are only accepted in the male world once they had sacrificed their femininity.

Although my paper will produce a study in which both the sexist speech of the male characters as well as the female characters are being assessed, my paper will then cross examine how this study is proof of the way media perpetuates sexism. We live in a society with rampant gender inequality in most public and private domains of life. In the wider context, a woman making a sexist or negative statement about a man is not the same as a man making a sexist or negative statement about a woman. A woman's negative comment about a man is not readily accepted as the norm, nor does it take away from male privilege or their status in society; and therefore, the comments made by women and men in this study do not hold the same weight and should be treated as such.

This paper will use the study to look at the way in which male characters use sexist language predominantly as a way of propagating androcentric world views, and how these stereotypes reinforce a patriarchal society and therefore act as a form of female oppression. I will prove the hypothesis that male characters are more likely to use sexist language to gain

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<sup>6</sup> *The Little Mermaid*, dir. by Ron Clements, John Musker (Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 1989). Henceforth referred to in text as *The Little Mermaid* (1989)

control of the narrative. I shall be arguing that sexism against women cannot be exposed through individual words or phrases that can be objectively rooted from our use of language. Rather, we must look at the underlying sexist belief system that a word or phrase may carry, which portray women as inferior to men. In this paper, I will be looking at the categories of sexist language used in the two films, as well as the types of phrases most used by male and female characters to support the thesis that films use the speech of male characters to further androcentric views of women.

### Research Design

Two Disney movies were selected as the primary sources for this research: *The Little Mermaid*, which was produced in 1989, and *Mulan*, which was produced in 1998. All scenes in both movies were analysed to avoid missing dialogue. Operational definitions and coding characteristics were chosen as the basis for the content analysis.

All speaking gendered characters in the movies were selected for analysis, both human and non-human characters. Non-human characters were also chosen because both movies revolve strongly around main characters that although are not human, still portray a biological sex, of either male or female. The study recorded the ratio of male to female characters and coded dialogue spoken by the characters. To determine the ratio of dialogue spoken by male and female characters, the movie scripts/screenplays were analysed.

### Method

A coded content analysis approach was used to identify and record gender bias language depicted in the films by each gender. Similar methodology has been used and proved as effective by past research in gender studies. Previous studies have also used coding, operational definitions, and content analysis to look at language in Disney films, such as Veronica Hefner et al (2017)<sup>7</sup> 'A content analysis of romantic ideals in Disney princess films' and Azmi et al (2016)<sup>8</sup> 'Gender and speech in a Disney princess movie'. This study's research design and operational definitions were informed by these two studies as the basis for its research design. These previously used methods have proved to be able to effectively gather quantitative data. This study uses a similar approach to gather quantitative data about the types of negative or stereotypical language used by male and female characters about the opposite sex and how often it was used. Table 1 lists the behavioural categories that were observed and their measurable observational definitions.

### Coding Procedure

The male and female characters were coded separately. A character was assigned one code every time they (a) mentioned the opposite sex in a negative light or (b) spoke negatively to another character of the opposite sex or (c) insinuated something negative about the opposite sex. Each time the character exhibited a new behaviour, the behaviour was coded. In addition, a new behaviour was coded each time the scene changed, or a new expression was used. The expressions used were written down alongside the sex of the character, their name, and the category in which the expression would fall under (Table 12 & 13). This was recorded in a table, and at the end of the study, a tally was made of the number of instances for each category (Table 14 & 15); this data can be found in the appendix.

The methodology used excludes female characters talking about female characters (and likewise males), which is also an outlet for sexist prejudice. This decision was made with the

<sup>7</sup> Veronica Hefner et al, 'Happily Ever After: Content Analysis of Romantic Ideal in Disney Princess Films', *Communication Studies*, 68.5, (2017), 511-532.

<sup>8</sup> Azmi N.J et al, 'Gender and Speech in a Disney Princess Movie', *International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature*, 5.6, (2016), 235-239.

studies aims in mind. As the aim of the study is to generate findings on what male characters say about female characters and how this contributes to perpetuating gender bias and discrimination against women.

Furthermore, a decision had to be made regarding whether to account for sexist language towards Mulan whilst she was disguised as a man. These instances were included, as the character was disguised as a man but still portraying feminine characteristics in her attempt to fit in. This decision was also made due to the audiences' awareness of her character being female.

#### *Limitations of the Study*

A limitation of the study is the sample size. Two movies were assessed in this study. Therefore, the sample size is too small to draw accurate and reliable results that are generalisable to all of Disney's works or media as a whole. However, despite this drawback, previous research has been done into the distribution of language used by characters in Disney movies, which will be drawn on in the study, and show a pattern of the same findings as the small sample size.

Another limitation that may impact the study is reliability. Because this is a single authored work, the inter-rater reliability is low. This study would need to be repeated by another person to improve the validity of the study.

#### *Pilot*

Before the study was conducted, a pilot study was done using *Princess and The Frog*<sup>9</sup>. The pilot study was to test the method of the study. The pilot study found that the frequency of sexist speech used by males was more frequent (a total of 28 instances) as opposed to that of women (a total of 16 instances). The pilot study also showed weaknesses in the methodology. The definitions were too broad, and because of the pilot study, they were narrowed and made more specific. The updated methods were then applied to the actual study.

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<sup>9</sup> *Princess and the Frog*, dir. by Ron Clements, John Musker (Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2010).

**Table 1: Operational Definitions and Examples of Stereotypical & Sexist Language**

<b>Categories</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Example Statements</b>
<b>1. Blame</b>	Any expression that indicated a character or gender was to blame for an event or situation.	<p>“Now thanks to you I am the laughingstock of the entire kingdom!” – Sebastian, <i>The Little Mermaid</i> (1989)</p> <p>“Gentlemen, thanks to your new friend Ping, you'll spend tonight picking up every single grain of rice.” – Li Shang, <i>Mulan</i> (1998)</p>
<b>2. Interruption</b>	Any expression used to speak over another character who was already speaking.	
<b>3. Direct Command</b>	Any expression that indicated the character was being told to do something (with or without force) or an action was being forced upon them.	<p>“There is only one way to ask her / it don't take a word / not a single word / go on and kiss the girl.” – Sebastian, <i>The Little Mermaid</i> (1989)</p> <p>“Silence! You will do well to teach your daughter to hold her tongue in a man's presence.” – Chi Fu, <i>Mulan</i> (1998)</p>
<b>4. Assumption</b>	Any expression which suggests it knows a character or genders needs or wants –disregarding their identities or opinions.	<p>“The men up there don't like a lot of blabber / they think a girl who gossips is a bore” – Ursula, <i>The Little Mermaid</i> (1989)</p> <p>“My girl will marvel at my strength, adore my battle scars!” – Yao, <i>Mulan</i> (1998)</p>
<b>5. Direct Insult</b>	Any expression that suggests a direct insult using offensive or derogatory words or phrases in expressing anger or annoyance.	<p>“Flounder, don't be such a guppy.” – Ariel, <i>The Little Mermaid</i> (1989)</p> <p>“I knew there was something wrong with you! A woman! Treacherous snake!” – Chi Fu, <i>Mulan</i> (1998)</p>
<b>6. Sarcasm or Status</b>	Any expression that indicates a sarcastic, derogatory, or negative attitude or uses words or phrases to mock the	<p>“If Ariel was my daughter, I'd show her who was boss. None of this 'flitting to the surface' and other such nonsense. No sir, I'd keep her under tight control.” –</p>

	character or gender. Including status words or titles to degrade or assert status.	Sebastian, <i>The Little Mermaid</i> (1989)  “And I am Yao, King of the Rock! And there's nothing you <i>girls</i> can do about it.” – Yao, <i>Mulan</i> (1998)
7. Objectified or Dismissed	Any expression that indicated that a character or gender was being disregarded. This may be through ignoring them; suggesting they are only useful for menial gain of the opposite sex or through using objectifying language that disregards their identities as complex. This does not include complimentary language.	“When he takes you for that ride . . . You gotta bat your eyes . . . pucker your lips” – Sebastian, <i>The Little Mermaid</i> (1989)  “How 'bout a girl who's got a brain, who always speaks her mind?” “Nah!” – Mulan, <i>Mulan</i> (1998)
8. Indirect Insult	Any expression that would perpetuate stereotypically negative views about a character or gender.	“Somebody’s got to nail that girls’ fins to the floor” – Sebastian, <i>The Little Mermaid</i> (1989)  “Just because I look like a man doesn't mean I have to smell like one” – Mulan, <i>Mulan</i> (1998)
9. Gender Bias	Any expression that would indicate that certain behaviours, jobs, or roles are reserved for each sex and cannot be associated with the opposite sex. Such as strength and fighting being reserved for men or crying and cooking being reserved for women.	“Nice young ladies don’t – swim around – rescuing people ... like some...” – Grimsby, <i>The Little Mermaid</i> (1989)  “I couldn't care less what she'll wear, or what she looks like! It all depends on what she cooks like!” – Chien-Po, <i>Mulan</i> (1998)

## Analysis and Discussion of Findings

### Research Question 1

The first research question looks at the distribution of the number of male and female characters from each movie, with more than fifty words of dialogue, both male and female. This can be seen in the table below: “Table 2 characters with more than fifty words of dialogue”.



**Table 2: Characters with More Than Fifty Words of Dialogue**

<b>List of characters in <i>The Little Mermaid</i> (1989) with more than 50 words of dialogue:</b>	<b>List of characters in <i>Mulan</i> (1998) with more than 50 words of dialogue:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Sailors 1,2,3</li> <li>● Seahorse</li> <li>● Louis</li> <li>● Sebastian</li> <li>● King Triton</li> <li>● Scuttle</li> <li>● Grimsby</li> <li>● Flounder</li> <li>● Prince Eric</li> <li>● Ursula</li> <li>● Triton's daughters x6</li> <li>● Carlotta</li> <li>● Ariel</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Fa Mulan</li> <li>● Grandmother Fa</li> <li>● Makeover Women 1</li> <li>● Fa Li</li> <li>● The Matchmaker</li> <li>● Mushu</li> <li>● General Li Shang</li> <li>● Yao</li> <li>● Ling</li> <li>● Chien-Po</li> <li>● Chi Fu</li> <li>● Emperor of China</li> <li>● Great Ancestor</li> <li>● Fa Zhou</li> <li>● Shan Yu</li> <li>● General Lee</li> </ul>
Males: 11 Females: 9	Males: 11 Females: 5

The material used to determine if a character had more than fifty words of dialogue was the script of *The Little Mermaid* (1989)<sup>10</sup> and *Mulan* (1998)<sup>11</sup>. The results show that in both films, there were more male characters that had a major role in dialogue than female characters. There were overall more male characters, and despite the lead of both movies being female, the male characters still dominated the films' dialogue. By attributing most of the films' dialogue to male characters, the views and beliefs of the male characters are more often delivered to the audience. A female character cannot form an opinion if she is not given the chance. Besides being interrupted in the films, the female characters have already been removed from the conversation.

There is a significant difference in the number of main or lead female characters in both films, with more than fifty words of dialogue. In *The Little Mermaid* (1989), the total number of females with more than fifty words of dialogue is nine. However, this figure is misleading, as six of the nine characters are the daughters of Triton, whose dialogue is limited to one song throughout the film. The actual figure of speaking characters when excluding the daughters of Triton is three, in comparison to the eleven male speaking characters. The same can be said for the female characters in *Mulan* (1998). These five female characters in *Mulan* (1998) are also limited in screen time, only appearing at the beginning of the film to represent the female's role in society and family and appear again at the end of the film to acclimate Mulan back into her feminine role and duty.

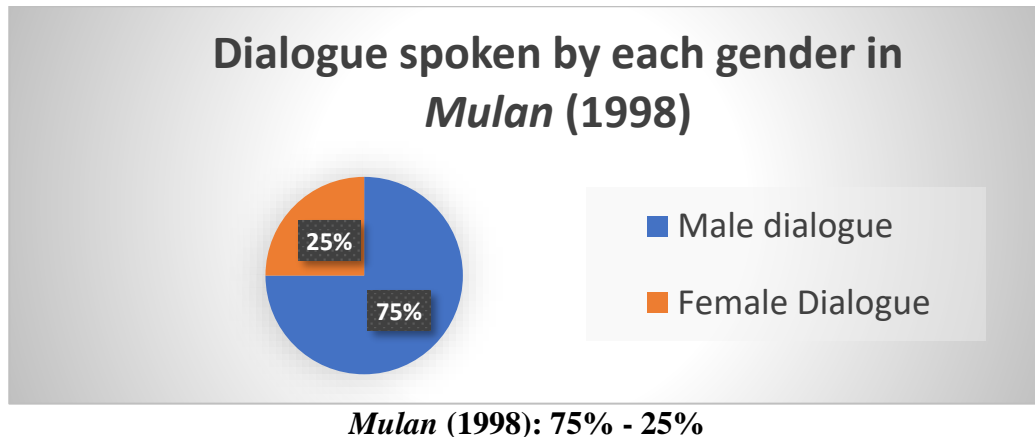
<sup>10</sup> Corey Johanningmeier, *The Little Mermaid: The Complete Script* (2003) <<http://www.fpx.de/fp/Disney/Scripts/LittleMermaid.html>> [accessed 26 May 2020]

<sup>11</sup> Ash Ketchum, *Mulan: The Complete Script* <<http://www.fpx.de/fp/Disney/Scripts/Mulan.html>> [accessed 26 May 2020].

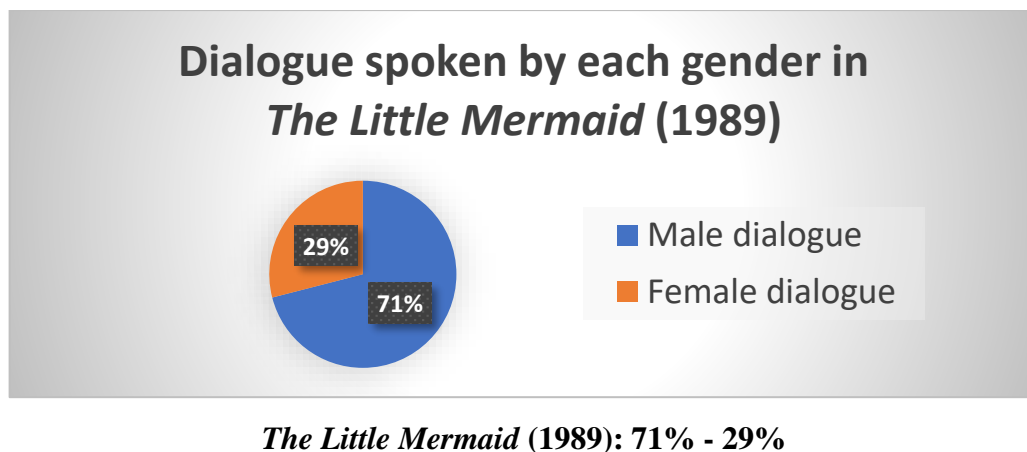
*Research Question 2*

The second research question looks at the percentage of dialogue spoken by each gender (presented in Figures 1 & 2). The findings of this research question were derived from a previous study done on language in Disney films and is part of a larger collection of results<sup>12</sup>.

**Figure 1: Percentage of Dialogue Spoken by Each Gender in *Mulan* (1998)**



**Figure 2: Percentage of Dialogue Spoken by Each Gender in *The Little Mermaid* (1989)**



The results show that in both films the dialogue spoken by male characters was significantly more than the dialogue spoken by female characters. Male characters dominated speech. The average of the two films show that male characters make up 73% of total speech in the films, whereas female characters only make up 27% of dialogue. These findings were expected by the thesis but are inconsistent with the films' aims. If the movies are 'Princess movies' with female leads, aimed at young female audiences, then the question to consider is: why is most of the dialogue by males?

<sup>12</sup> Hanah Anderson and Matt Daniels, *The Largest Ever Analysis of Film Dialogue by Gender* (2016) <<https://pudding.cool/2017/03/film-dialogue/>> [accessed 25 May 2020].

*Research Question 3*

The third research question looks at the total number of sexist expressions used by each sex about the opposite sex:

- The first is discriminatory language used by men about women in each film
- The second is discriminatory language used by women about men in each film

The results have been categorised and recorded in the tables below.

*Blame*

**Table 3: Frequency of Language Using Blame by Each Gender**

<b>Film</b>	<b>Frequency of blame used by males, directed at females</b>	<b>Frequency of blame used by females, directed at males</b>
<i>The Little Mermaid</i>	2	0
<i>Mulan</i>	5	1

The first category for sexist expression and language is 'Blame'. This is categorised in Table 1 as "Any expression that indicated a character or gender was to blame for an event or situation" and included both direct and indirect speech. The findings show that in *The Little Mermaid* (1989), the use of blame was only used by males and directed at females. The same could be said mostly for *Mulan*, as there was a substantial number of times males placed blame on females, specifically five times, whereas females were only blamed once.

This shows that in both films, responsibility for events or situations being mishandled or going wrong are blamed primarily on female characters as the sole perpetrators of destructive behaviour. They exclude the responsibility on the male counterparts as being involved with the situation or having any part in the blame. Male characters more frequently blame female characters for situations they find themselves in, instead of equating the situation with the result of their own actions.

*Direct Insult*

**Table 4: Frequency of Language Using Direct Insults by Each Gender**

<b>Film</b>	<b>Frequency of direct insults used by males, directed at females</b>	<b>Frequency of direct insults used by females, directed at males</b>
<i>The Little Mermaid</i>	0	2
<i>Mulan</i>	5	1

In *The Little Mermaid* (1989), direct insults only occur twice, and both instances are said by females and directed at males. In *Mulan* (1998), direct insults are used more often by male characters than female characters. Overall, direct insults in *Mulan* (1998) are used predominantly against women. This shows a change in the way direct insults have been portrayed in film, as the usage increased in the decade between the release of the two films.

Overt or direct sexism is language which is objectively discriminatory and insulting and has historically been associated with discriminatory opinions about females. Direct sexism, therefore, was the type of language mostly challenged by feminists and as a result became stigmatised by most language users. However, as a result, direct sexist language evolved to forms of more indirect usage, which allows users to "express sexism, whilst at the same time denying responsibility for it" [Mills 2008]. Alone, the findings for 'direct insults' do not portray

this trend. However, when analysed with data found on ‘indirect insults’, an increase in the use of ‘indirect insults’ can be seen in *Mulan* (1998) from the time *The Little Mermaid* (1989) had been released.

*Indirect Insult*

**Table 5: Frequency of Language Using Indirect Insults by Each Gender**

<b>Film</b>	<b>Frequency of indirect insults used by males, directed at females</b>	<b>Frequency of indirect insults used by females, directed at males</b>
<i>The Little Mermaid</i>	6	0
<i>Mulan</i>	7	3

The table of results shows that there was a total of 13 instances of ‘indirect insults’ directed at females in both movies, whereas there was a total of 3 indirect insults used against men in both movies. These figures show a greater disparity in findings than any other category and is supported by the earlier notion of how direct insults fell out of usage by males and were replaced with more indirect forms of sexist language [Mills 2008] as can be seen in these films and this data.

*Interruption*

**Table 6: Frequency of Language Using Interruption by Each Gender**

<b>Film</b>	<b>Frequency of interruptions used by males, directed at females</b>	<b>Frequency of interruptions used by females, directed at males</b>
<i>The Little Mermaid</i>	5	2
<i>Mulan</i>	3	2

The above table shows the number of times a male interrupted a female and every time a female interrupted a male. Although the results show that there were less than eight interruptions in either film, the above results also show that the frequency of interruptions in *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and *Mulan* (1998) were mostly by males interrupting females.

These results are supported by a previous study done by Zimmerman and West [1975], who found that in same-sex conversation, such as conversations just between men and conversations just between women, interruptions were more evenly distributed to each speaker. This was not the same for inter-sex conversations between men and women, which found that men were more likely to interrupt women when talking to dominate the conversation<sup>13</sup>.

*Sarcasm/Status*

**Table 7: Frequency of Language Using Sarcasm/Status by Each Gender**

<b>Film</b>	<b>Frequency of sarcasm/status used by males, directed at females</b>	<b>Frequency of sarcasm/status used by females, directed at males</b>
<i>The Little Mermaid</i>	2	1
<i>Mulan</i>	3	0

<sup>13</sup> Zimmerman D & West C, *Sex roles, interruptions, and silences in conversations* (Newbury House: Rowley, Mass, 1975), p. 105-129.

Another way in which sexist terms are used whilst denying responsibility is using sexist language and covering it up with sarcasm, humour, or social status. The above results show that male characters were more likely to use sarcastic forms of sexist language to insult females than female characters were when it comes to male characters. The data shows an even distribution in both films use of sarcasm & status. With male characters using this form of sexist language more often than female characters.

These findings are supported by a study into uses of such sexist language, which showed that this type of sexism was largely used by young men [Mills 2008]. From the present study of the two Disney films, the results share the same conclusion. Language which employs sarcasm and status in both films are almost always used by male characters.

### *Assumptions*

**Table 8: Frequency of Language Using Assumptions by Each Gender**

<b>Film</b>	<b>Frequency of assumptions used by males, directed at females</b>	<b>Frequency of assumptions used by females, directed at males</b>
<i>The Little Mermaid</i>	1	3
<i>Mulan</i>	6	2

Although I have recorded instances of assumptions made by female characters about males, the data is not inclusive of the context in which the assumptions were made. In both films, males would make assumptions about females and the things they want, need, or like, attributing to them prejudice opinions. The latter was not the case for women. Their assumptions drew on the way they believe men perceive women rather than on their own biases.

For example, in *The Little Mermaid* (1989), the sea witch does not say that men do not like women who “gossip” because she is being sexist. She says it because she is drawing attention to sexist society in which women are interrupted frequently by men when talking and are silenced so often that women have internalised that men prefer women who are silent. The female characters portray an internalisation of sexism and reproduce this in their speech.

The constructionist perspective of language suggests that our identity as women and men is manufactured through language, and therefore observing sexist discourse is important in assessing the ways in which we view our gender identity and the way in which others view our gender [Mills 2008]. Any sexist remarks made against one woman, is therefore, in the public sphere, generalised to all women.

A woman laughing at a sexist joke made about females is seen as either empowerment or an attempt to not lose face. *Mulan* portrays this behaviour repeatedly throughout her time disguised as a man, as she tries to be ‘one of the guys’. In both her attempts at being a convincing male, and in the assumptions made by the female characters, there are many instances in which the female characters in *Mulan* (1998) and *The Little Mermaid* (1989) admit to recognising a remark or joke as sexist.

In both films, most stereotypical language used by women were not to demean men, but to insinuate what was known about their likes and dislikes in women or an attempt to act like them, to please them, or to fit in. Women’s stereotypical language, therefore, is not a reflection of their bias against men, but rather their language mirrors what they believe is men’s bias against them.

In the female characters use of language, there is a repetition of the reiteration of sexist language against females. They make assumptions about the way men think about and perceive women and, at large, the way the world thinks about and perceives women. This concept is

prevalent in feminist and language studies, where theorists have explained that as a socialised society, we choose language which allows us to make sense of the world around us and that these choices are a manifestation of a wider patriarchal society<sup>14</sup>.

*Direct Commands*

**Table 9: Frequency of Language Using Direct Commands by Each Gender**

<b>Film</b>	<b>Frequency of direct commands used by males, directed at females</b>	<b>Frequency of direct commands used by females, directed at males</b>
<i>The Little Mermaid</i>	3	0
<i>Mulan</i>	3	0

This category of ‘direct commands’ refers to all language which portrays a character being told what to do, being ordered to do something, or having an action forced on them. Commands are given by those in a higher status of authority to those who are in a lower position of authority. In both films, the findings suggest that only male characters gave commands or direct orders to female characters.

For example, King Triton in *The Little Mermaid* (1989) would tell Ariel to “go to your room”, or Shi Lang would tell Mulan to “Go home”. In both instances, the male characters are in a higher and more authoritative position than that of the female characters. However, there are also instances where lower positioned males give orders to higher positioned females, such as when Sebastian tells Ariel “Don’t you shake your head at me young lady” [*The Little Mermaid* 1989], although she is a Princess and is higher in status than him. There is also the realisation that despite the female lead’s authority over certain individuals, they choose not to give direct commands, even when they can.

*Gender Bias*

**Table 10: Frequency of Language Using Gender Bias by Each Gender**

<b>Film</b>	<b>Frequency of gender bias used by males, directed at females</b>	<b>Frequency of gender bias used by females, directed at males</b>
<i>The Little Mermaid</i>	2	0
<i>Mulan</i>	9	2

The above table shows that the instances of gender bias, which is categorised by “Any expression that would indicate that certain behaviours, jobs or roles are reserved for each sex and cannot be associated with the opposite sex. Such as strength and fighting being reserved for men or crying and cooking being reserved for women.”

There are no instances of gender bias being used by female characters in *The Little Mermaid* (1989), and the instances of male characters using gender bias are relatively low in comparison to the male characters using gender bias in *Mulan* (1998). The significant increase in the use of gender bias from 1989 to 1998 suggests and supports the earlier finding that direct forms of

<sup>14</sup> Mary Ellen Griffith, 'Sexism, Language and the Law', West Virginia Law Review, 91.1, (1998).

stereotypical and sexist language have been dropped for more indirect uses of stereotypical language.

*Objectification/Dismissal*

**Table 11: Frequency of Language Using Objectification/Dismissal by Each Gender**

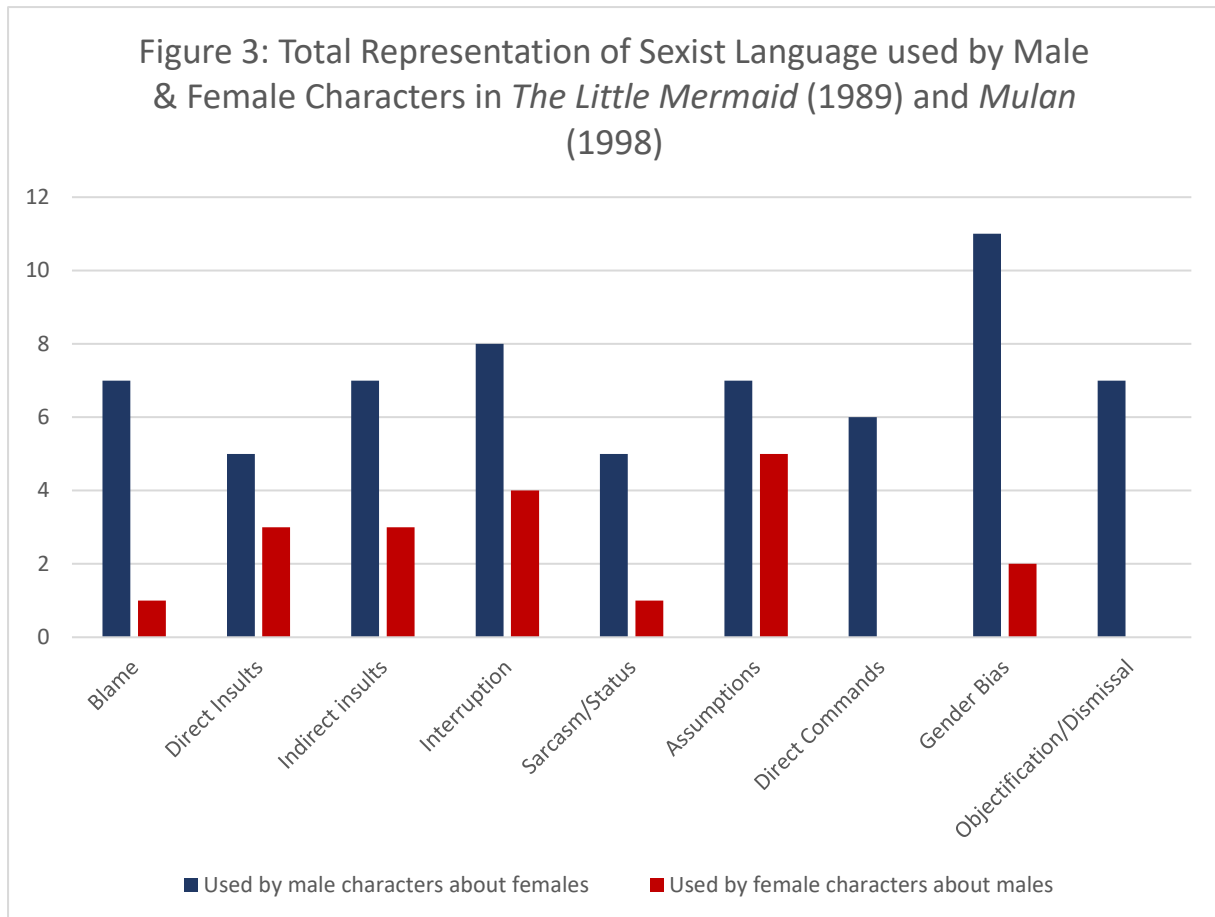
<b>Film</b>	<b>Frequency of objectification/dismissal used by males, directed at females</b>	<b>Frequency of objectification/dismissal used by females, directed at males</b>
<i>The Little Mermaid</i>	1	0
<i>Mulan</i>	6	0

The above table shows the instances where a character was objectified or dismissed. The table shows that in both films, there were no instances of objectification or dismissal directed at male characters. All instances of objectification and dismissal were directed at female characters by the male characters. The results also show that there was a significant increase in the use of objectification and dismissal from *The Little Mermaid* (1989) to *Mulan* (1998).

With increasing awareness of discrimination, women are less likely to allow themselves to be subject to objectification and are less likely to tolerate discrimination. This would suggest that confidence of women would also rise as a result, and use of objectifying language would decrease over time. However, the opposite is true. Alongside posters of films about female warriors and female superheroes, captioning ‘girl power’, there has been an increase in adverts of beauty contests, anorexia, and news about rape.

Films like *Mulan* (1998) have increased their use of objectification as a source of humour. The misconception is that women have been empowered, while “the re-sexualisation of women’s bodies in public space goes virtually unremarked upon. . . Feminism has never been more bitterly repudiated” [Mills 2008].

The table below shows the total number of instances in both films where categories of sexist language were used by either male characters or female characters.



The bar chart shows the total usage of each category of sexist speech used by each sex in both films. The chart shows that male characters used most of the sexist speech in the films, and male characters also used more of every category of sexist speech. The chart also shows that women did not direct any use of objectification or dismissive language at males. The most common type of sexist language used by female characters was assumptions, which as was discussed earlier, were instances mostly influenced by societal norms and pressures as to how women should behave, rather than actual sexist remarks about males.

The chart also shows that besides using more sexist language than female characters, the most common type of sexist language used by male characters was ‘Gender Bias’, which is speech that perpetuates stereotypical gender roles that typically disregard women’s roles as lesser than that of male roles.

### Limitations & Conclusion

Have sexist and stereotypical views seeped into our culture to such a point that it is now prevalent in stories for children, animations for families, and fairy tales for generation after generation? Are these stereotypical views intended by Disney to create humour? or have they been intended to replicate Disney’s perception of societal norms? Decades of suffragette movements have improved the reality of women in the West, giving them reproductive rights, voting rights, educational rights, and work rights, among other forms of change. Sexism is still prevalent today, and women are still marginalised. But the question is why? And how do we change it? Although we have taken steps to give women back their rights, how far have we progressed in the way that we speak and respect females? The things we say about each other continue to perpetuate our understanding of one another. Women cannot be completely free of



patriarchal oppression if they are still being verbally abused through the androcentric language of film and those who mirror this in real life.

The aim of this study was to investigate the use of sexist language by gender in the two Disney princess movies, *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and *Mulan* (1998). The dialogues were coded based on feminist research into language discourse, which was then separated into nine observable categories. Data analysis showed that the most stereotypical and sexist language used by males is 'gender bias', whereas the most common for females is 'assumptions'. Analysis also showed that males were more likely to use sexist language than females, proving the paper's original thesis.

How far can this study be generalised? A limitation of the study is the choice of films. Besides having a small sample, the chosen films may bias outcomes, as the attitude of gender in one film is very different to the other. However, the two films were chosen because of this distinction. By looking at two films with very different views on gender, the study also reflects how gender perception has changed in the decade between the release of the two films. Further analysis revealed that use of sexist language did not decrease between the release of the two movies, but rather increased in usage.

Disney has made a significant leap in the actions of female characters, where once they were the princesses that needed saving, they are now princesses that save themselves and others. However, this progression is stunted by the language of the films, which continue to degrade women by suggesting that they are emotionally charged individuals whose role is to marry a nice young man, through which they may bring honour to their families.

And what of the audience that are consuming these films? Through vicarious reinforcement, these films are proliferating the subjugation of women and the doctrine of an androcentric society. Children are the consumers of the cartoon and animated film industry. Language has always been created and moulded by the dictionary compilers, the governments, and the hands of the powerful. Those hands, concretely male hands, have created a doctrine of an androcentric language which plays in the homes of children worldwide. It shapes their views of the world, of society, and of each other, and informs the ways they speak to and address each other.

Disney princess movies pre-1995 largely had feminine female princesses, whereas post-1995 saw a change in the types of princesses displayed on screen. What can be made of these changes to the traditional role of the princess character? The 1989 princess, Ariel, is a sexually liberated mermaid, whereas the 1998 princess, Mulan, is a tomboyish war hero. Was the change from the voluptuous singing maid to the warrior princess an attempt at changing feminine representation in media? Did Disney believe they only need to change the look of the character, to change the audience's perception of them? Could Ariel not save herself because she only had her looks? Could Mulan not be a warrior and overtly feminine? In both *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and *Mulan* (1998), the male characters stayed relatively the same, with their looks, their indirect sexist speech, their hero-like involvement in the plot of the story, and their overpowering time involved in dialogue. Was changing the outer appearance of the female characters the answer to sexist female representation? Did Disney believe there was no need for change amongst the male characters?

This paper has provided insight into the ways in which media remains a platform for influencing minds with stereotypical and negative views of women, no longer through powerlessness of action, but through dismissal of language. A further study could increase the sample size by looking at all the Disney animated prince and princess movies, as well as increasing the number of reviewers to reach a more concise and generalisable conclusion and increase the validity of the study.

Conclusively, I propose that language needs to be changed first and foremost in children's films. To create a reform and change to language, those with the most influence must

be the contact points for change. Media is a key platform used to perpetuate sexual discrimination and is an influential source of socialisation for children; therefore, action must be taken to change the way language is used in media, beginning with Disney princess movies. And more specifically, beginning with the words, phrases, and utterances used by male characters about or directed at female characters. It is only by beginning with change in films for children of the next generations that we may pave a new era of language, learning, and love for one another, giving each other the respect we deserve. It is only then, that we will create real change.

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Appendix

Table 12: Content Analysis Coding Procedure for *The Little Mermaid* (1989)

NAME	GENDER	DIALOGUE	CATEGORY
Sailors	M	“Look out, lad, a mermaid be waitin’ for you ...”	Assumption
Ariel	F	“You can just stay here and watch for sharks.”	Sarcasm/Status
Triton	M	Interrupting Ariel	Interruption 1 Interruption 2 Interruption 3
Sebastian	M	“Now thanks to you I am the laughingstock of the entire kingdom!”	Blame
Ariel	F	“Flounder, don’t be such a guppy.” “Flounder, you really are a guppy.”	Direct Insult 1 Direct insult 2
Triton	M	“Never to hear of you going to the surface again. Is that clear?”	Direct Commands
Sebastian	M	“Teenagers . . . They think they know everything.” “Headstrong teenager”	Indirect insult 1 Indirect insult 2
Sebastian	M	“If Ariel was my daughter, I’d show her who was boss. None of this ‘flitting to the surface’ and other such nonsense. No sir, I’d keep her under tight control.”	Sarcasm/Status
Triton	M	“Ariel needs constant supervision.”	Sarcasm/Status
Sebastian	M	“Ariel, stop talking crazy.” “Will you get your head out of the clouds and back into the water, where it belongs”	Indirect insult 1 Indirect insult 2
Sebastian	M	“Somebody’s got to nail that girls’ fins to the floor”	Indirect insult
Triton	M	Interrupting Ariel	Interruption 1 Interruption 2
Ariel	F	Interrupting Triton	Interruption 1
Triton	M	“Have you lost your senses completely?”	Indirect insult
Ariel	F	Interrupting Sebastian	Interruption 1
Ursula	F	“The men up there don’t like a lot of blabber / they think a girl who gossips is a bore” “. . . They’re not all that impressed with conversation/true gentlemen avoid it when they can” “It’s she who holds her tongue who gets her man”	Assumption 1 Assumption 2 Assumption 3
Sebastian	M	“Don’t you shake your head at me young lady”	Direct Command
Grimsby	M	“Nice young ladies don’t– swim around – rescuing people ... like some -”	Gender Bias
Louis	M	“Fight like a man”	Gender Bias
Sebastian	M	“. . . the single most humiliating day of my life. I hope you appreciate what I go through for you, young lady.”	Blame
Sebastian	M	“When he takes you for that ride . . . You gotta bat your eyes . . . pucker your lips”	

			Objectified/Dismissed
Sebastian	M	“There is only one way to ask her / it don’t take a word / not a single word / go on and kiss the girl.”	Direct command

**Table 13: Content Analysis Coding Procedure for *Mulan* (1998)**

NAME	GENDE R	DIALOGUE	CATEGORY
Mulan	F	Interrupting Fa Zhou	Interruption
Matchmakers	F	“Boys will gladly go to war for you/ with good fortune/ and a great hairdo”	Assumption
Matchmakers	F	“Men want girls with good taste/calm/obedient/who work fast paced/with good breeding/and a tiny waist”	Assumption
Chi Fu	M	“Silence! You will do well to teach your daughter to hold her tongue in a man's presence.”	Direct Command
Chi Fu	M	Interrupting Mulan	Interruption
Fa Zhou	M	“Mulan, you dishonour me.”	Indirect Insult
Fa Zhou	M	“I know my place. It is time you learned yours.”	Gender Bias
Mulan	F	“So, you’ll die for honour.”	Indirect Insult
Fa Zhou	M	Interrupting Mulan	Interruption
Ancestor #2	M	“Don’t look at me, she gets it from your side of the family.”	Blame
Ancestor #2	M	“Well, we can’t all be acupuncturists.”	Sarcasm/Status
Ancestor #6	F	“No. Your great granddaughter had to be a cross-dresser.”	Indirect Insult
Ancestor #6	F	“Your misguidance led Fa Thang to disaster.”	Blame
Mushu	M	“I’m doomed, and all because Ms man decided to take her little drag show on the road.”	Blame
Mushu	M	“I make Mulan a war hero, and they’ll be begging me to come back to work!”	Objectified/Dismissed
Mulan	F	“I see you have a sword. I have one, too. They’re very manly, and strong.”	Gender Bias
Mushu	M	“Dishonour! Dishonour on your whole family! Make a note of this. Dishonour on you, dishonour on your cow, dis-”	Indirect insult
Mulan	F	Interrupting Mushu	Interruption
Mushu	M	“Time to show them your man-walk. Shoulders back, chest high, feet apart, head up, and strut!”	Gender Bias
Mulan	F	“They’re disgusting.”	Direct Insult
Mushu	M	“It’s all attitude! Be tough, like this guy here!”	Gender Bias

Mulan	F	“But you know how it is when you get those manly urges ... just gotta KILL something. Fix things ... cook outdoors ...”	Gender Bias
Chi Fu	M	“Your commanding officer just asked you a question.”	Direct Command
Chi Fu	M	“The boys an absolute lunatic”	Direct Insult
Li Shang	M	“Gentlemen, thanks to your new friend Ping, you'll spend tonight picking up every single grain of rice.”	Blame
Mushu	M	“You know, we have to work on your people skills”	Indirect Insult
Mushu	M	“Oh, I think my bunny slippers just ran for cover. C'mon, scare me, girl!”	Sarcasm/Status
Li Shang	M	“You're unsuited for the rage of war”	Gender Bias 1
		“So, pack up, go home, you're through How could I make a man out of you”	Gender Bias 2
Mulan	F	“Just because I look like a man doesn't mean I have to smell like one”.	Indirect Insult
Mushu	M	“Stand watch, Mushu, while I blow our secret with my stupid girly habits. Hygiene.”	Direct Insult
Yao	M	“And I am Yao, King of the Rock! And there's nothing you girls can do about it.”	Sarcasm / Status
Ling	M	“Don't be such a g-”	Indirect Insult
Mushu	M	“No, that was vile. You owe me big.”	Blame
Mushu	M	“Go to your tent!”	Direct Command
Mushu	M	Interrupting Mulan	Interruption
Chi fu	M	“And I do not squeal like a girl!”	Gender bias
Ling	M	“I want her paler than the moon, with eyes that shine like stars.”	Objectified / Dismissed
Yao	M	“My girl will marvel at my strength, adore my battle scars!”	Assumption
Chien-po	M	“I couldn't care less what she'll wear, or what she looks like! It all depends on what she cooks like!”	Gender Bias
Ling	M	“And I bet the ladies love a man in armour!”	Assumption
Yao	M	“My girl will think I have no flaws . . .	Assumption
Chien-po		“My girl will think... That I'm a major find”	Assumption
Ling, Yao & Chien-po	M	“How 'bout a girl who's got a brain, who always speaks her mind?” “Nah!”	Objectified/ Dismissed
Ling	M	“My manly ways and turn of phrase are sure to thrill her!”	Assumption
All Soldiers	M	“But when we come home, in victory / They'll line up at the door!”	Assumption

Mushu	M	Mushu Wolf Whistles at a group of women working in the fields	Objectified/Dismissed
Mushu	M	"I knew we could do it! You the man! Well, sort of."	Gender Bias
Chi Fu	M	"I knew there was something wrong with you! A woman! Treacherous snake!"	Direct Insult
Mushu	M	"You wanted to save your father's life. Who knew you'd end up shaming him, disgracing your ancestors, and losing all your friends? Y'know, you just gotta ... just gotta learn to let these things go."	Indirect insult
Mushu	M	"I risked your life to help myself."	Objectified/Dismissed
Li Shang	M	"You don't belong here, Mulan. Go home."	Indirect insult
Mushu	M	"no one will listen..." "huh?" "Mushu!" "Hey, you're a girl again remember"	Objectified/Dismissal
Soldiers 1&2	M	"Concubines" "Ugly Concubines"	Direct insult 1 Direct insult 2
Chi Fu	M	"That was a deliberate attempt on my life. Now she's done it."	Blame
Chi Fu	M	"Stand aside. That creature's not worth protecting."	Indirect insult
Chi Fu	M	"She's a hero" "Tis a woman. She'll never be worth anything"	Gender bias

**Table 14: Tally and Frequency of Study Variables for *The Little Mermaid* (1989)**

#	Categories	Total language used by males	Total language used by females
1	Blame	2	0
2	Direct Insults	0	2
3	Indirect insults	6	0
4	interruptions	5	2
5	Sarcasm/Status	2	1
6	Assumptions	1	3
7	Direct commands	3	0
8	Gender Bias	2	0
9	Objectified/Dismissed	1	0

**Table 15: Tally and Frequency of Study Variables for *Mulan* (1998)**

#	Categories	Total language used by males	Total language used by females
1	Blame	5	1
2	Direct Insults	5	1
3	Indirect insults	7	3
4	interruptions	3	2
5	Sarcasm / Status	3	0
6	Assumptions	6	2
7	Direct commands	3	0
8	Gender Bias	9	2
9	Objectified/Dismissed	6	0