Cartoon Voices: Language and Ideology







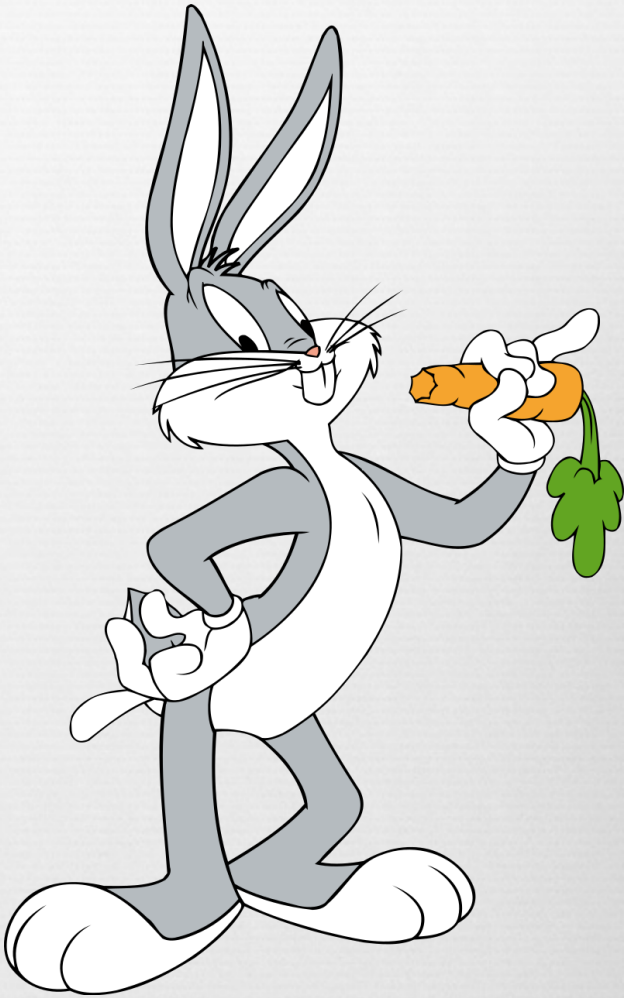
Luke Lindemann
Illusions of Language
Yale University
April 11, 2019



Listen to the following clips of Warner Brothers' *Looney Tunes* characters.

- What language variety or varieties?
- Particular linguistic features?
- Evocation of stereotypical social/personality traits by speakers of this variety?



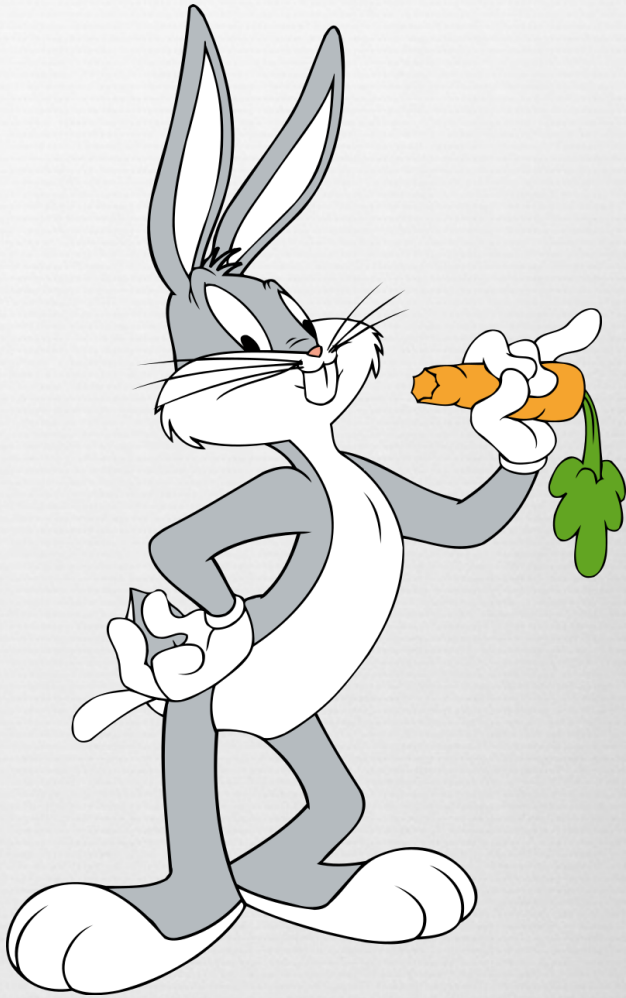


"I knew I shoulda taken that left toin at Albeqoique"



- *Curl-Coil* Merger (Labov 1966)
- /ð/->[d]
- 19th CE New York Irish

(Barrier 2003)







"I don't see that silly pussycats today. He mus' be asleep. I better wake heem up."



- Simplified final clusters
- /ɪ/->[i]
- "Mexican Spanish" accent







“Ah, my leetle darleeng. It ees love at first sight, is it not? No? <<*mwah, mwah, mwah, mwah*>> ”



- /ɪ/->[i]
- “French” accent







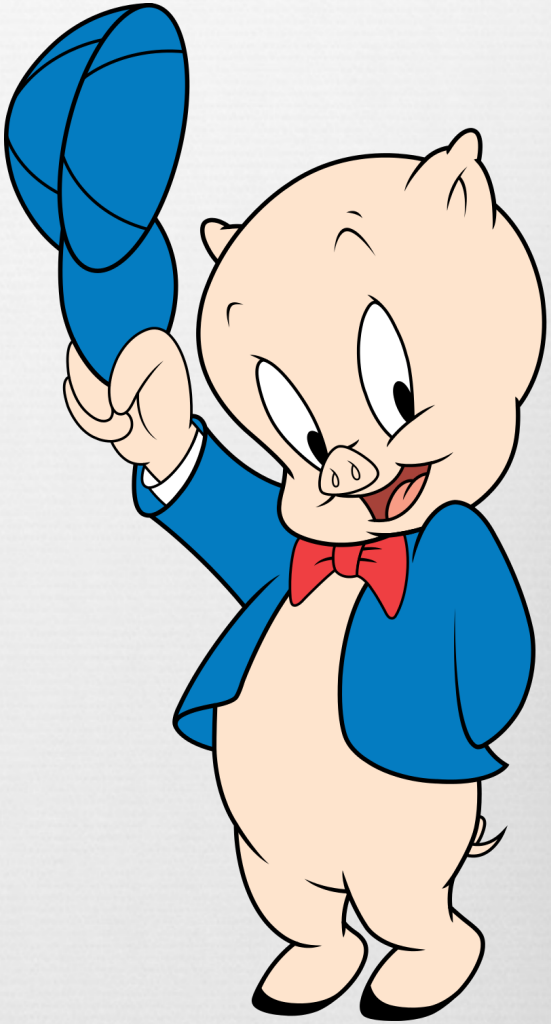
“Come outta there, ya flea-bitten varmint, afore I blast the fur clean offen yer carcass!”



- Southern American English
- Western stock character

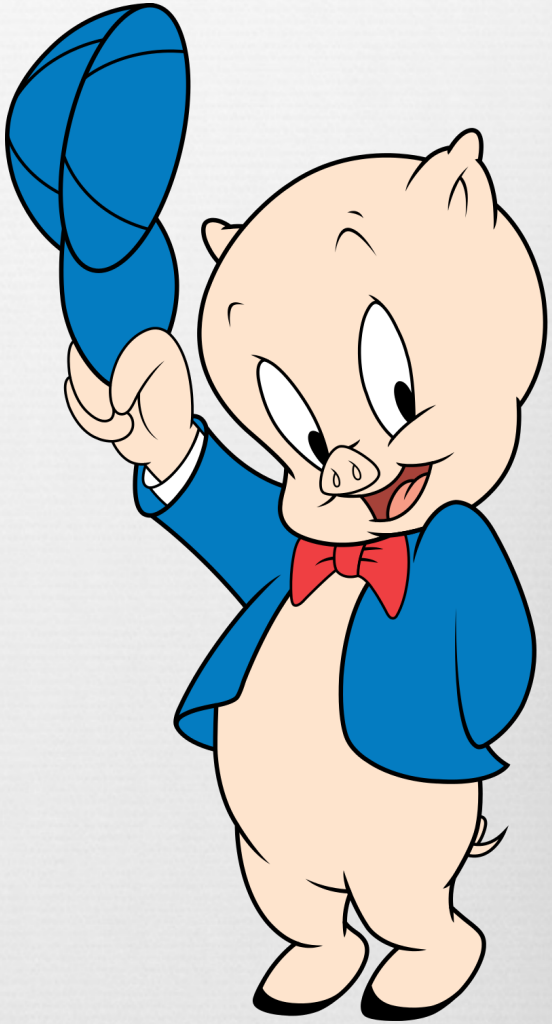






"I'm eh r- rea- uh r- rea- uh r- rea- uh r- all set, your heroship, sir."





- Speech Disorder: Stutter
- Incomplete Syllable repetition and correction





“I’ll twick that wabbit! I’ll set my wabbit twap!”



- /r/->[w]
- Speech Disorder: De-rhotacization







“I can’t ssstand a sssore loser.”



- Speech Disorder: frontal lisp







"Uh, ah! Dat putty tat aftah me adain."





- Elements of children's speech

Motivations



Why study language in Disney movies and Looney Tunes?

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Disney is the focus here because it holds such a large share of the market; for example, among its holdings are five film studios in addition to a majority share in twenty different television stations." Lippi-Green (2012: 103)

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- Today, **Disney** owns **Pixar**, **LucasFilm**, **Marvel Studios**, and **20th Century Fox**
  - 36% of movie revenues from 2018 (more than $4 billion according to Box Office Mojo)
  - WarnerMedia, the next biggest, owned 16%

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- Misinformation, trivialization, and marginalization of stigmatized varieties

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- Children use television to learn about ethnicity (Graves 1993)

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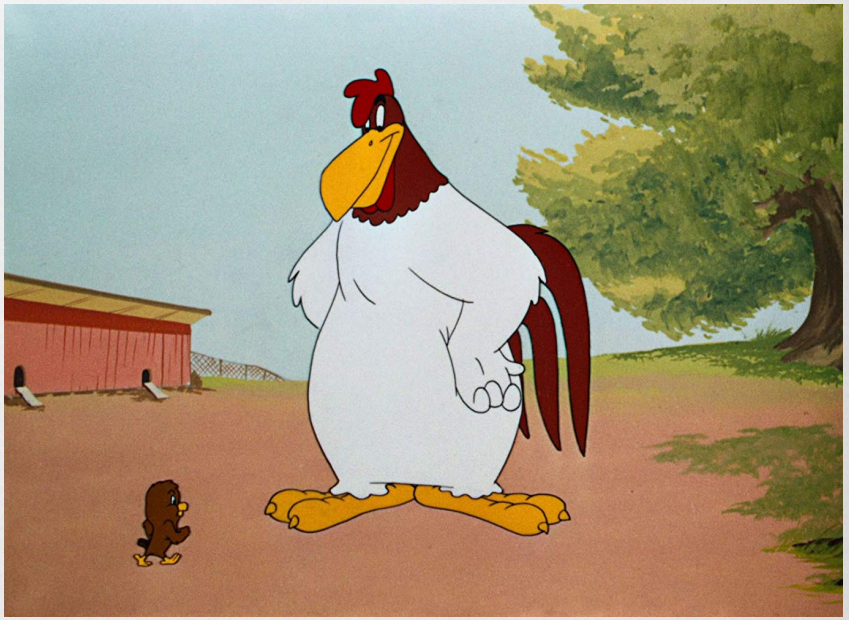
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- Constant borrowing of characters between performance forms



Senator Claghorn (Kenny Delmar)



Foghorn Leghorn (Mel Blanc)



Mean Widdle Kid (Red Skelton)



Tweety Bird (Mel Blanc)

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- Cartoon characters as **"vestigial minstrels"** (Sammond 2015: 1)



Suwannee Minstrel show in Lake Wales, Florida (1952)

“American animation, which had its origins and developed many of its enduring conventions on the vaudeville stage, is not merely one more in a succession of textual forms; **it is also a performative tradition that is indebted to and imbricated in blackface minstrelsy and vaudeville.**” (Sammond 2015:4)

Language in Disney's Feature Films



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  - 9% have foreign accents

Lippi-Green's 1997 Study

- Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937)
- Pinocchio (1940)
- Dumbo (1941)
- The Reluctant Dragon (1941)
- Bambi (1942)
- Cinderella (1950)
- Robin Hood (1953)
- Peter Pan (1953)
- Lady and the Tramp (1955)
- Sleeping Beauty (1959)
- 101 Dalmations (1961)
- The Sword in the Stone (1963)
- The Jungle Book (1967)
- The Aristocats (1970)
- The Rescuers (1977)
- The Fox and the Hound (1986)
- The Great Mouse Detective (1986)
- The Little Mermaid (1989)
- Duck Tales: Treasure of the Lost Lamp (1990)
- The Rescuers Down Under (1990)
- Beauty and the Beast (1991)
- Aladdin (1992)
- The Lion King (1994)

Lippi-Green's 2012 Reanalysis

- Pocahontas (1995)
- The Hunchback of Notre Dame (1996)
- Hercules (1997)
- Mulan (1998)
- Tarzan (1999)
- The Emperor's New Groove (2000)
- Atlantis: The Lost Empire (2001)
- Lilo & Stitch (2002)
- Treasure Planet (2002)
- Brother Bear (2003)
- Home on the Range (2004)
- Chicken Little (2005)
- Meet the Robinsons (2007)
- Bolt (2008)
- The Princess and the Frog (2009)

Subsequent Disney Films

- Tangled (2010)
- Winnie the Pooh (2011)
- Wreck-It Ralph
- Frozen (2013)
- Big Hero 6 (2014)
- Zootopia (2016)
- Moana (2016)
- Ralph Breaks the Internet (2018)

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- Protagonists and Antagonists speak English natively
  - Characters with accents are **peripheral**
  - 40% are evil, versus 20% of native English speakers
  - They tend to represent **cultural stereotypes**

Beauty and the Beast (1991): France



Belle:
Standard American English

The Beast:
Standard American English



Beauty and the Beast (1991): France



Gaston:
Standard American English

Le Fou:
Standard American English



Beauty and the Beast (1991): France



Cogsworth:
Standard British English

Mrs. Potts:
Standard British English



Beauty and the Beast (1991): France



Lumiere:
French-accented English

Plumette:
French-accented English



The Lion King (1994): Africa



Simba:
Standard American English

Scar:
Standard British English



The Lion King (1994): Africa



Mufasa:
Standard American English

Nala:
Standard American English



The Lion King (1994): Africa



Timon:
New York English



Pumbaa:
“U.S. Urban” English

The Lion King (1994): Africa



Shenzi:
African-American Vernacular English / Standard American English



Banzai:
“Latino-accented English”

The Lion King (1994): Africa



Zazu:
Standard British English



Rafiki:
Swahili-accented English

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- The trend was broken by Cobra Bubbles in *Lilo & Stitch* (2001) and many characters in *The Princess and the Frog* (2009)

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- This is partly due to the post-*Jungle Book* practice of hiring popular entertainers as voice actors based on name recognition

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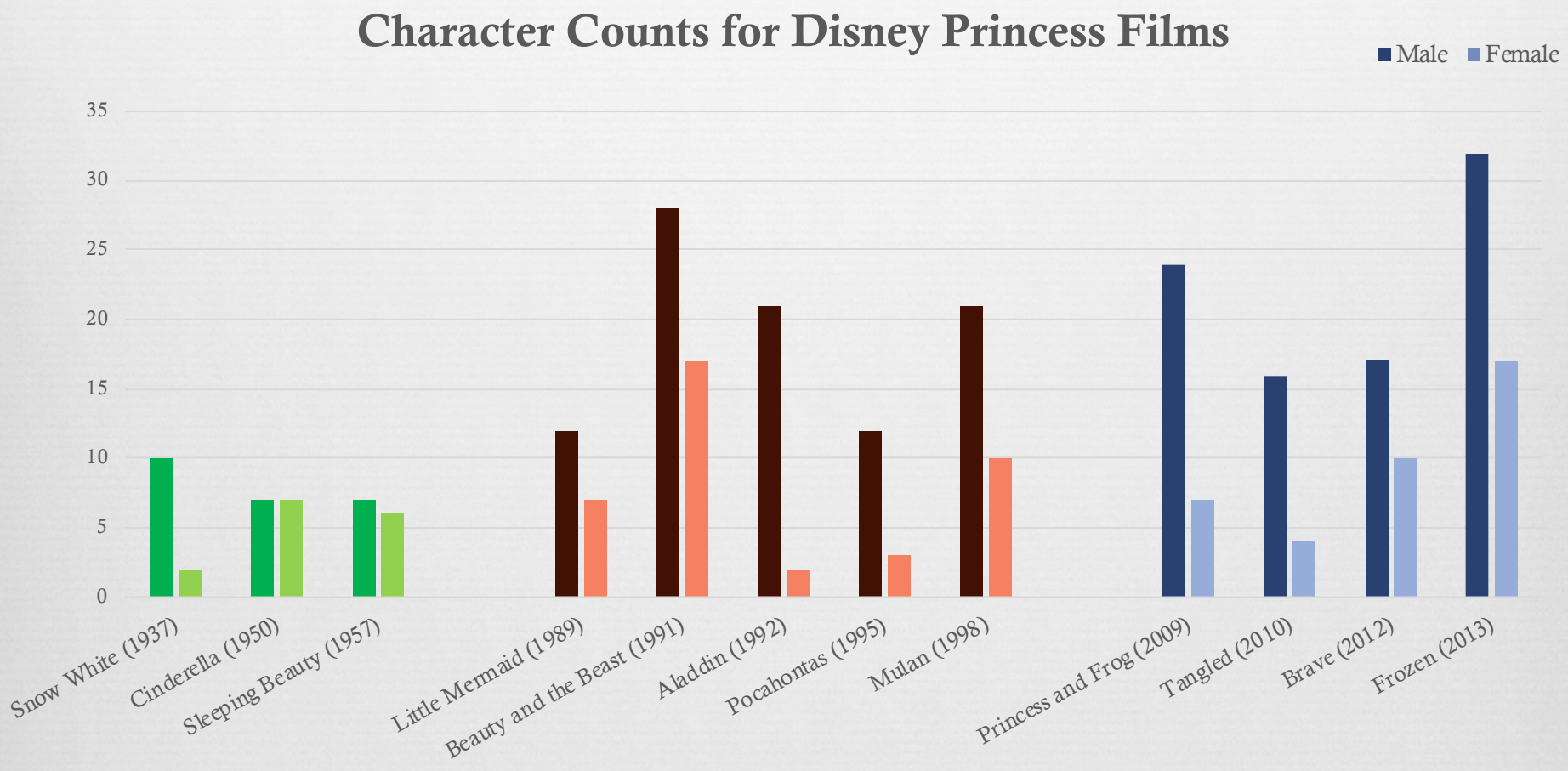
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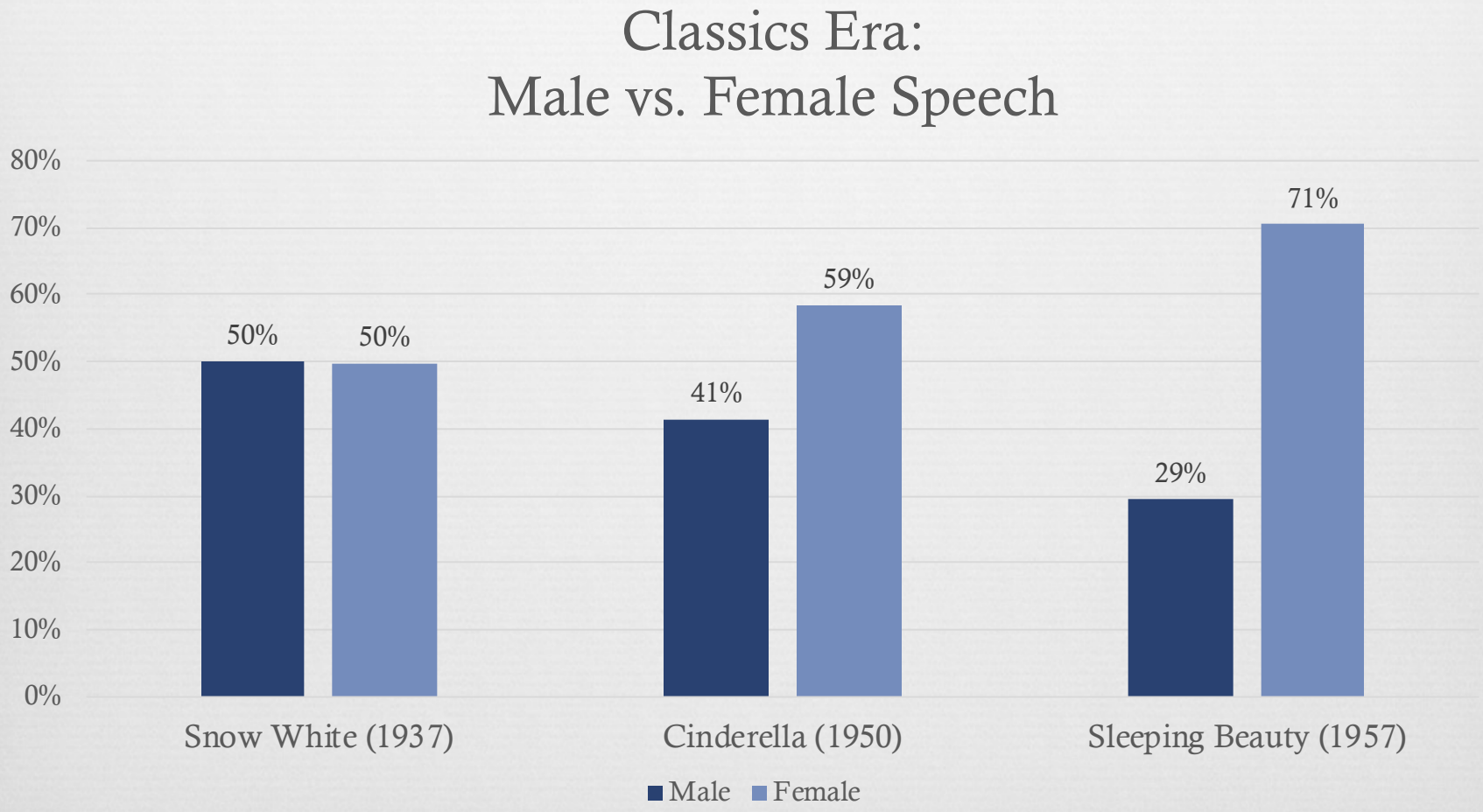
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- **New Age Era: 2009-**
  - The Princess and the Frog (2009)
  - Tangled (2010)
  - Brave (Pixar) (2012)
  - Frozen (2013)

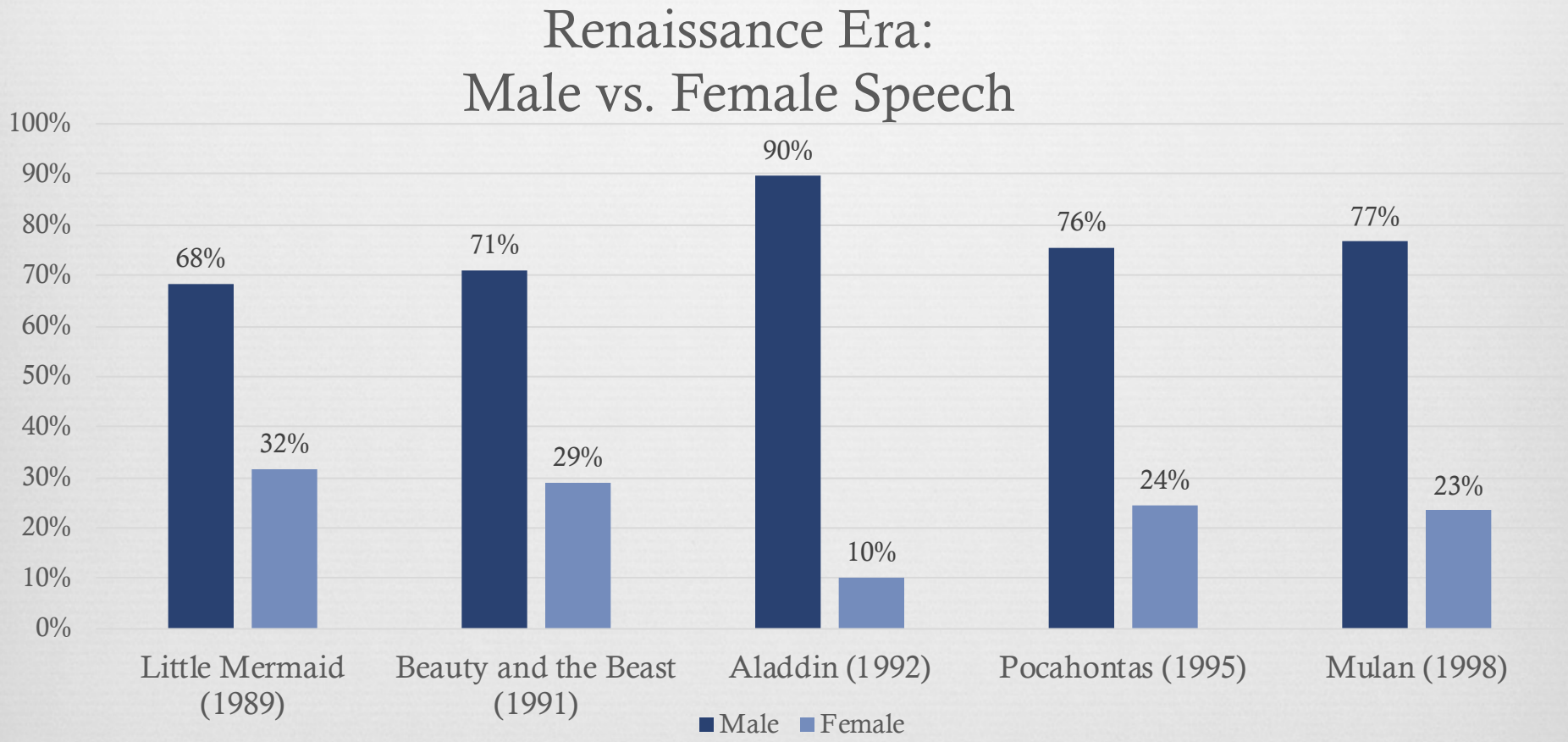
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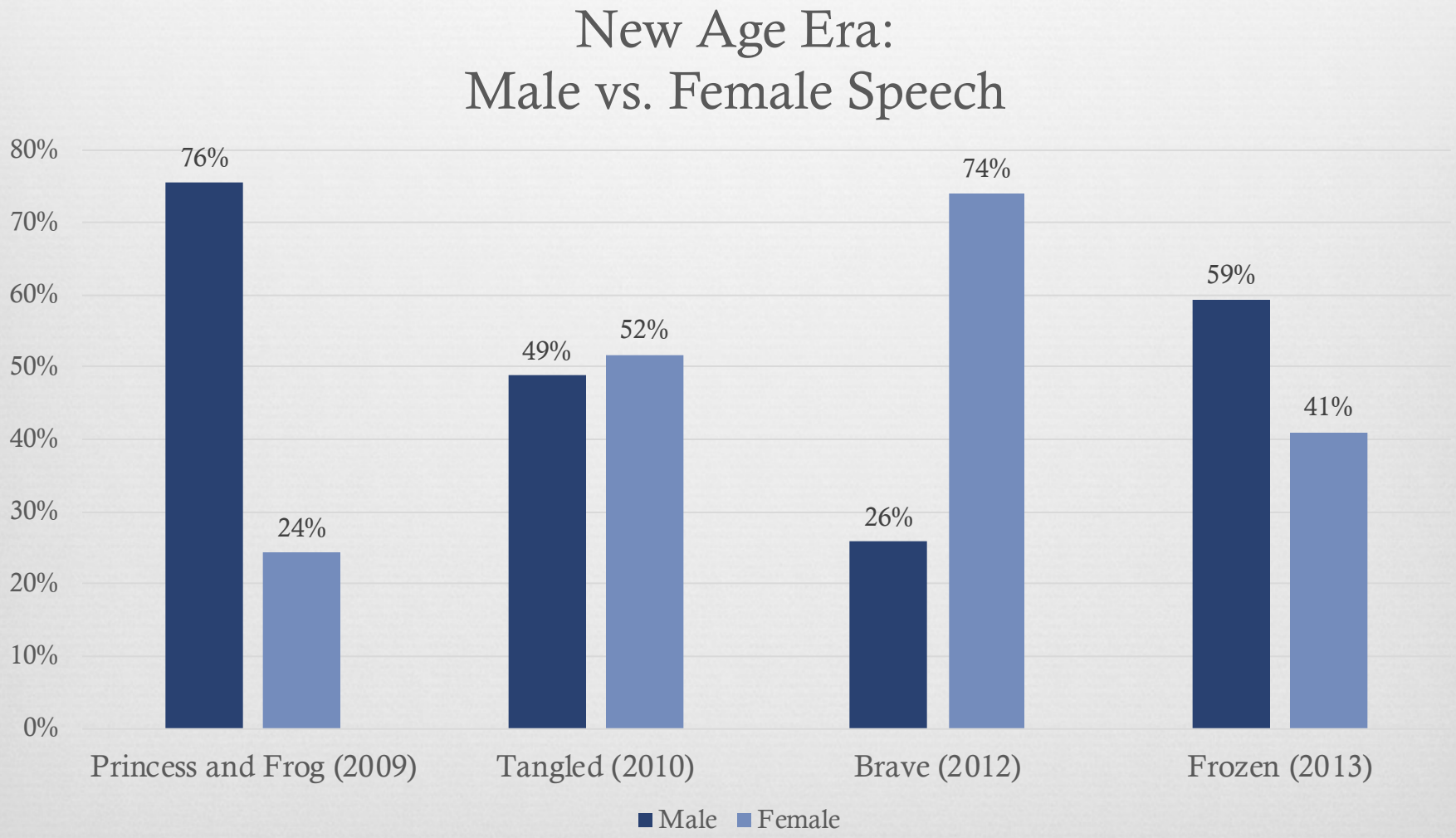
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  - Female characters are mothers, princesses, daughters, nannies, housekeepers, servants
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- Analysis of politeness strategies reinforces gender norms (Eisenhauer 2017, Benabdellah 2018)

Other Studies



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- **The Adventures of Tintin**
- **Aladdin**
- **Animaniacs**
- **Arthur**
- **Beast Wars**
- **C-Bear and Jamal**
- **Captain Planet**
- **The Flintstones**
- **Megaman**
- **Project G.eeK.eR**
- **Samurai Pizza Cats**
- **Scooby Doo**

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- However, a trend towards more diversity in representation

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- "[C]hildren's televison relies heavily on language to mark characters' personalities." (114)

- "Speakers of British English are portrayed dichotomously as either the epitome of refinement and elegance or as the embodiment of effete evil." (117)

Bleichenbacher (2008) is a detailed analysis of multilingualism in 28 major Hollywood films from 1984-2003

- **Amadeus (1984)**
- **Behind Enemy Lines (2001)**
- **The Bourne Identity (2002)**
- **Braveheart (1995)**
- **Clear and Present Danger (1994)**
- **Elizabeth (1998)**
- **Fools Rush In (1997)**
- **Frantic (1988)**
- **French Kiss (1995)**
- **GoldenEye (1995)**
- **Green Card (1990)**
- **Hannibal (2001)**
- **The Hunt for Red October (1990)**
- **The Jackal (1997)**
- **Just Married (2003)**
- **License to Kill (1989)**
- **The Living Daylights (1987)**
- **The Peacemaker (1997)**
- **The Pianist (2002)**
- **Red Heat (1988)**
- **Sabrina (1995)**
- **Saving Private Ryan (1998)**
- **Schindler's List (1993)**
- **The Sum of All Fears (2002)**
- **Tomorrow Never Dies (1997)**
- **Traffic (2002)**
- **A View to a Kill (1985)**
- **The World is Not Enough (1999)**

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  - Presence (16 movies) – the given language is employed with or without subtitles/translation

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  - In *Amadeus* (1984) the aristocracy have British accents and Mozart has an American accent

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  - But multilingualism does not make them more positively valuated

50th ANNIVERSARY EDITION

CLINT EASTWOOD



THE GOOD THE BAD and THE UGLY

co-starring
LEE VAN CLEEF

also starring
ELI WALLACH
in the role of TUCO

directed by
SERGIO LEONE



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- Bleichenbacher finds this pattern unchanged in 2003

Discussion Questions



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   - In modern cartoons or Hollywood movies?
3. Should we show classic Looney Tunes cartoons and Disney films to children?

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Cletus, the Slack-Jawed Yokel, *The Simpsons*



Oaken, *Frozen*



Duchess, *The Aristocats*

Moana, *Moana*

