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Article – Theme section

Teaching children to discriminate?
A quantitative study of linguistic representation in Disney's "Revival Era" animated films

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Abstract

Rosina Lippi-Green's (1997, 2012) classic quantitative study of linguistic representation in animated Disney films of the 20th century found these films to be discriminatory. Her main and most publicized finding was that characters who spoke varieties of American English tended to be morally good, while characters with a foreign accent were often evil and untrustworthy. Following a methodological discussion of Lippi-Green's approach as it relates to our own, we investigate the degree to which her results also describe 273 characters from Disney's successful "Revival Era," starting with The Princess and the Frog *(2009) and ending with* Encanto *(2021). We find, among other significant developments, that the foreign-accented characters in these more recent films are distinctively good. Also examined are other relationships between characters' language, moral standing, gender, and age. Notably, female and younger characters tend to speak Standard American English, and they tend to be more moral than male and older characters. We end by discussing some possible causes of the main developments.*

Keywords

Disney, language, accent, representation, accentism

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Introduction

Rosina Lippi-Green's (1997, 2012) classic study of linguistic difference and discrimination in the animated films of the Walt Disney Company starts by discussing some examples. Singled out for particular attention is *The Three Little Pigs*, a still-popular animated short from 1933 in which a villainous wolf tries to trick three pig brothers into letting him into their house in order to eat them. One of the wolf's tricks is to dress up as a big-nosed Jewish peddler (who would presumably not eat pork). So disguised, the wolf knocks on the pigs' door and offers to sell them his wares in a distinctively Yiddish accent. The message conveyed by this scene seems to be not to trust someone who looks and talks like that. An edited version of the same cartoon from 1948 replaced the offensive imagery, but the Yiddish accent survived until eventually removed in a later revision of unverifiable date (Kaufman, 1988). Other villainous portrayals of ethnolinguistic difference in Disney include the mischievous Siamese cats in *Lady and the Tramp* (1955), the hotheaded Italian Stromboli in *Pinocchio* (1940), as well as a slew of British English bad guys, such as Prince John (*Robin Hood*, 1973), Shere Khan (*The Jungle Book*, 1967), and Scar (*The Lion King*, 1994). These characters' accents mark them out and serve stereotypically to express the particular flavor of their badness—whether violent and overbearing, as in the case of Stromboli, or scheming and cynical, as in the case of Scar.

Lippi-Green identified such cases with a broader trend. Specifically, her quantitative analysis of full-length animated Disney films released between 1937 and 1994 uncovered significant associations between characters' language varieties and morality, such that heroic characters were disproportionately likely to speak American English and villainous characters often adopted foreign accents (detailed results will be recounted in the next section). Through this general trend, Lippi-Green argued, Disney causes children to "associate specific characteristics and lifestyles with specific social groups, and to accept a narrow and exclusionary world view" (Lippi-Green, 2012, p. 111). In short, Disney is "teaching children how to discriminate" (Lippi-Green, 2012, p. 101). These disconcerting findings continue to inform studies of linguistic variation and discrimination in different media (Dragojevic et al., 2016; Ensslin, 2010; Goorimoorthee et al., 2019; Queen, 2013) and are often cited in support of the view that Disney animation—which represents a shared cultural touchstone for young Western and Western-influenced audiences around the globe—promotes a discriminatory worldview (e.g., Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010, p. 217). The same findings have also inspired recent popular articles about linguistic discrimination in Disney and other animation aimed at children, which bear titles such as "Why Do Cartoon Villains Speak in Foreign Accents?" (Fattal, 2018) and "Disney, Why Do Your Villains Have Foreign Accents?" (Clever, 2020).

However, all that can truly be concluded from Lippi-Green's original study today is that Disney's major animated films *were* discriminatory. The most recent film analyzed in the study was the 1994 epic *The Lion King*, and the 2000s and 2010s witnessed major shifts in the culture of Disney and entertainment media more generally. Notably, Disney's

films increasingly revolve around themes of challenging prejudices and negative stereotypes (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen & Schmidt, 2019). In *Zootopia* (2016), for example, the anthropomorphic rabbit protagonist Judy Hopps overcomes societal prejudice against rabbits by showing her worth as a police officer, while she herself learns to overcome her own prejudices about supposedly dangerous predator species. In the cameo-filled *Ralph Breaks the Internet* (2018), formerly passive and helpless "Disney Princesses" from previous films (of whom not all are actual princesses) join together to save the film's brawny male protagonist, and the irony is not lost on the viewer. Moreover, The Walt Disney Company increasingly concerns itself with its own public image and social messaging. According to its website, Disney aims to "inspir[e] a better world" where "each person feels seen, heard, and understood." This declaration is supported with extensive reporting of the company's commitments and results regarding "diversity, equity, and inclusion" (The Walt Disney Company, n.d.). Disney has also added content warnings to many older films, such as *Dumbo* (1941) and *Lady and the Tramp* (1955), which repudiate the films' negative and stereotyping treatments of different peoples, places, and cultures.

Disney, then, presents itself as a socially conscious and responsible producer of entertainment media for everyone, and for children in particular. Is this commitment echoed by the company's most recent cast of animated characters—such that, as one proposed guideline to linguistic representation has it, "language or dialect background [should] not dictate character actions" (Karshner & Stern, 1990, preface)—or do these characters continue to express a linguistically discriminatory worldview? The present study seeks to answer this question by quantifying the extent to which Lippi-Green's results hold true of recent "Revival Era" films in Disney's animated canon. We analyze what were, at the time of conducting this study, the 12 most recent films produced by Walt Disney Animation Studios, starting with *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) and ending with *Encanto* (2021). Our main focus is the morally sympathetic or antipathetic representation of characters who speak different language varieties. However, we also examine various other developments concerning, and relationships between, language, morality, gender, and age in recent Disney characters. Where possible, we present direct comparisons to the findings of Lippi-Green (2012).

Lippi-Green's original study: Background and method

Lippi-Green's study was originally presented in *English with an Accent: Language, Ideology, and Discrimination in the United States* (1997), her book-length investigation of the relationships between language, on the one hand, and privilege, power, discrimination, and other social forces and meanings, on the other hand. The second edition of that book (2012) revised the presentation and terminology of the study, which appeared in the book's seventh chapter, and we will reference the presentation and terminology of the second edition. The second edition also included a "qualitative" extension of the original

study, which served to illustrate how the troubling results of the original study may also describe more recent Disney films.

Lippi-Green's study was premised on the notion that films and other media employ linguistic stereotypes as "shortcuts to characterization" (2012, p. 104), that is, as economical ways of communicating the personalities of characters by means of specific dialects, accents, and other forms of linguistic variation that have come to be associated with specific personal traits and cultural backgrounds (see also Hodson, 2014, Chapter 4; Kozloff, 2000, Chapter 2). For example, a Queen's English accent may be used to express arrogance and privilege through associations with the English upper class, whereas an urban American English accent may connote certain working-class sensibilities. Lippi-Green noted that linguistic stereotypes are often negative and damaging (e.g., Baker, 1992; Baugh, 2005), and that Disney, by presenting young and impressionable audiences with such stereotypes, may cultivate prejudiced attitudes toward certain kinds of speakers (see also Towbin et al., 2003). Her study has come to be seen as a pillar of modern Disney scholarship, much of which has focused on how the company's popular films may promote conservatively narrow and exclusionary ideologies (Giroux & Pollock, 2010; Hurley, 2005; Watsko, 2001; but see Drotner, 2002, on different audiences' varied perspectives on Disney films).

The main aim of the study was to investigate whether the very general and straightforwardly negative stereotype that speakers of non-standard and foreign language varieties are immoral would be echoed by Disney's cast of characters. This focus on moral normativity makes sense, as Lippi-Green explained, because Disney's animated films "rely so heavily on traditional themes of good and evil" (2012, p. 116); as Walt Disney himself put this point, "The important thing is to teach a child that good can always triumph over evil" (Disney & Jackson, 2006, p. 54). Above all, the characters in these films are understood and evaluated morally—as heroes or villains, helpers or henchmen. Associations between different language varieties and moral goodness or badness will therefore be especially salient and meaningful in Disney.

There are good reasons to be concerned about issues of linguistic representation in Disney's animated films, as elsewhere. Foreign-accented speech and other non-standard linguistic features tend to attract negative judgments (Ryan, 1983; see also Kinzler, 2020), which may start to form in early childhood (Girard et al., 2008; Kinzler et al., 2012) and which commonly express culturally transmitted stereotypes (e.g., Gill, 1994; Ladegaard and Sachdev, 2006; Luhman, 1990). Such negative language attitudes, in turn, can engender and perpetuate discriminatory practices (Cargile & Giles, 1997; Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010; Kinzler, 2020). For example, possessing a non-standard accent can negatively affect a speaker's perceived trustworthiness (Kinzler et al., 2011), intelligence (Lindemann, 2003), competence (Boyd, 2003), employability (Carlson & McHenry, 2006), and general likability (Bresnahan et al., 2002). There is also mounting evidence that accent is a basic dimension of social judgment and person perception (Kinzler et al., 2007, 2009). Infants preferentially orient to a familiar language variety, and children readily learn to socially discriminate on

the basis of accent—to the extent that, according to one highly publicized study, "accent trumps race in guiding children's social judgment" (Kinzler et al., 2009). If social judgment and behavior so easily and powerfully link up with language, it is important that people are not biased against specific language varieties by negative and misleading representations in popular media (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010; Lippi-Green, 2012). However, many studies identify biased linguistic representations in popular media, including film, television, and video games (e.g., Dragojevic et al., 2016; Ensslin, 2010; Fought & Eisenhauer, 2022; Queen, 2013). Pertinently, Dobrow and Gidney (1998) analyzed 222 characters in children's animated television programming in the U.S. and found that villainous characters were disproportionately likely to use non-American accents, including Slavic and British English accents.

In looking for such patterns in Disney, Lippi-Green (2012) and a team of research assistants analyzed 24 full-length animated Disney films, from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) to *The Lion King* (1994). Twenty-two of these 24 analyzed films form part of the "Classics" canon of Walt Disney Animation Studios, with the two exceptions being *The Reluctant Dragon* (1941) and *DuckTales the Movie: Treasure of the Lost Lamp* (1990). The films were determined to contain 371 characters with speaking roles, and all these characters were coded for language variety, morality, and gender. The main findings were as follows.

Language variety

The dominant language variety was found to be Standard American English, spoken by 43 percent of characters. Standard British English was spoken by 22 percent of characters. Less common language varieties included non-standard varieties of American English (13 percent), non-standard varieties of British English (11 percent), and foreign-accented English (9 percent). Other English varieties (e.g., Australian English) were spoken by only 2 percent of characters. Foreign-accented English was sometimes used to "convey the setting of the story" (Lippi-Green, 2012, p. 115), although only 15 percent of characters from non-anglophone places spoke with a fittingly foreign accent. (These percentages are reported, without decimal places, in Figure 7.3 on page 115 of the 2012 version of the study, as well as in Figure 5.3 on page 88 of the 1997 version of the study).[1]

Morality

The morality of characters was evaluated in terms of their "motivations and actions" (Lippi-Green, 2012, p. 116). Forty-nine point nine (49.9) percent of characters were unambiguously moral, while 19.4 percent were unambiguously immoral. Twenty-three point two (23.2) percent of characters had roles that were "too small and fleeting to make such a judgment." The remaining 7.5 percent of characters "change significantly in the course of the story (always from bad to good)" and were therefore determined to have mixed motivations.

Language variety and morality

The most disconcerting and frequently cited results of Lippi-Green's study concern associations between language variety and morality. Of all the characters who spoke a variety of American English and whose morality could be identified, only 19.9 percent were immoral. This number rose to 30.4 percent for speakers of British and other English languages, and to 40.7 percent of speakers of foreign-accented English (see Figure 1 and Table 1, below). Symmetrically, fully 73.5 percent of speakers of American English were morally positive.[2] This number dropped to 57.6 percent for speakers of British and other native kinds of English, and to 37.0 percent of characters with foreign (non-English) accents. Overall, these numbers document a systematic tendency to villainize "foreign" characters, who are often so marked by their foreign accents.

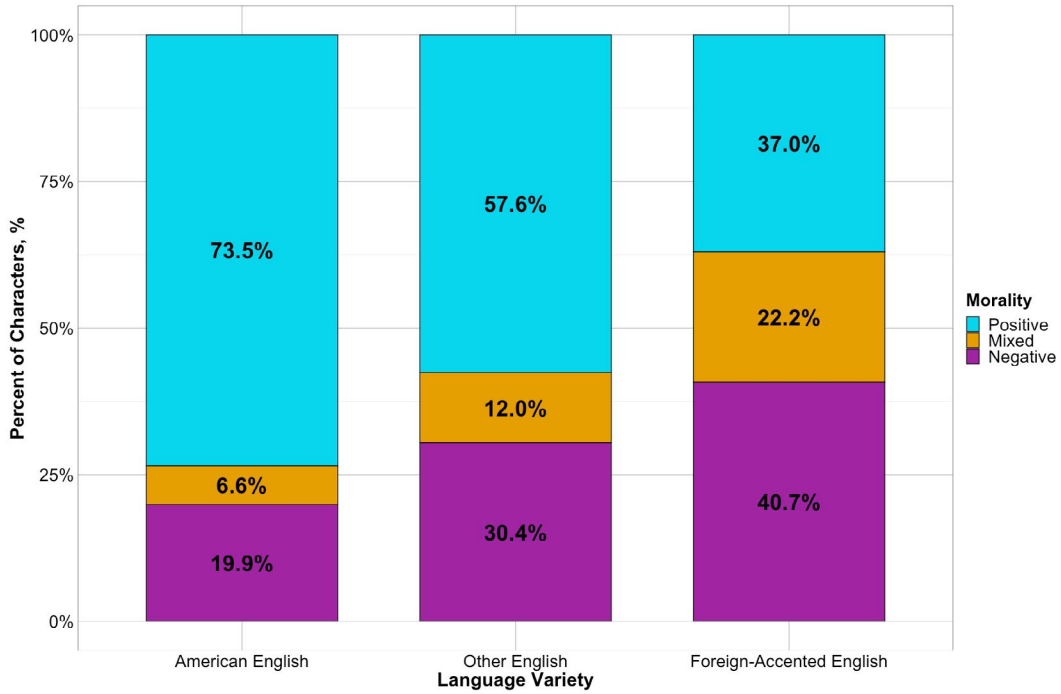

Figure 1. Characters by language variety and moral status in Lippi-Green (2012, Figure 7.8). This visualization, which we have updated from Lippi-Green's original for ease of comparison with our own, below, excludes characters whose morality could not be identified.

	American English	Other English	Foreign-Accented English
Positive	*n*=122	*n*=53	*n*=10
Mixed	*n*=11	*n*=11	*n*=6
Negative	*n*=33	*n*=28	*n*=11

Table 1. Characters by language variety and moral status in Lippi-Green (2012, p. 119). This distribution excludes characters whose morality could not be identified (n=86).

Gender

A clear gender bias emerged from the study. In total, 69.8 percent of characters were male, with females accounting for the remaining 30.2 percent (no indeterminable or non-binary characters were identified). Male and female characters were, however, "equally distributed as major and minor characters" (Lippi-Green, 2012, p. 114). Female characters were somewhat more likely to be morally positive (57.1 percent) than male characters (46.7 percent). Lippi-Green also impressionistically observed that female characters tended to revolve around the home and the family, which was not the case for the more active and adventurous male characters (Lippi-Green, 2012, pp. 114–115).

Limitations

For all of its comprehensiveness and continued relevance, Lippi-Green's study has two significant limitations. First, it is not clear how Lippi-Green identified the characters who were included in her study. No specific criterion appears in the 2012 presentation of the study, but the original 1997 version mentions that "all characters with speaking roles of more than single-word utterances were included in the analysis" (p. 86). This leaves unanswered whether these "speaking roles" are those that appear in the end credits of each film, which are frequently incomplete, or whether the characters were individuated by their actual appearances in the films. In addition, and as we will discuss in relation to our own methodological considerations, there are real questions about what constitutes a character and when one has enough linguistic material to identify a given character's language variety with an acceptable degree of certainty.

The second significant limitation of Lippi-Green's (2012) study is that it does not report its findings for each film and each character. This is understandable given that including a detailed character breakdown would have significantly lengthened the reporting of the study at little benefit to the general reader. But it means that one cannot check whether any individual character is correctly identified in terms of that character's language variety or morality, for example. One also cannot look for trends across time.

The present study addresses both of these limitations. The next section will describe how we identified and categorized characters with speaking parts. Additionally, we have compiled as supplementary material to this study a spreadsheet detailing all of our specific results for all characters. This spreadsheet will allow for checks on our results, and it

provides an opportunity for future studies to build on our method and results. The file is available at https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/26YTP.

To our knowledge, only one study has attempted to investigate quantitatively the degree to which Lippi-Green's (2012) main findings hold true of more recent films. Sønnesyn (2011) analyzed 18 animated Disney films released between 1995 and 2009 and found both consistent and divergent trends. Most notably, there was a reduction in linguistic diversity such that fewer characters spoke British English varieties (17.7 percent, down from 33 percent) and more characters spoke Standard American English (61.0 percent, up from 43 percent) (Table 4.15, p. 51). As for associations between language varieties and morality, Sønnesyn's different categories and analytical strategies prevent a direct comparison to Lippi-Green's study. However, her results (Figure 4.15, p. 78) indicate a mostly consistent picture in that "unsympathetic characters" had the lowest percentage of Standard American English speakers (40.0 percent) and the highest percentage of foreign-accented speakers (17.3 percent). The difference between "heroes and heroines" and "villains," however, was unexpectedly small, with 83.3 percent of heroic and 70.4 percent of villainous characters speaking Standard American English. The discriminatory trend was surprisingly reversed in the final set of moral character categories, "aide to hero" and "aide to villain." Only 60.3 percent of heroic helpers spoke Standard American English, whereas close to 90 percent (Figure 4.15; the exact percentage is not reported) of villainous henchmen did so.

Methodology

We analyzed what were, at the time of conducting the study, the 12 most recent fully animated Walt Disney Animation Studios films, or "Disney Classics," in their original, English-language versions. The analysis consisted of three full screenings of each film by the first author as these films appear on Disney's on-demand streaming service, Disney+, in addition to many repeated reviews of particular scenes and sequences. During the separate screenings of each film, a list of characters, including gender, age, language variety, and moral status, was compiled and continually checked for accuracy and consistency. The analyzed films are listed in Table 2, below.

The Princess and the Frog (2009)	*Zootopia* (2016)
Tangled (2010)	*Moana* (2016)
Winnie the Pooh (2011)	*Ralph Breaks the Internet* (2018)
Wreck-It Ralph (2012)	*Frozen II* (2019)
Frozen (2013)	*Raya and the Last Dragon* (2021)
Big Hero 6 (2014)	*Encanto* (2021)

Table 2. The analyzed films. Films with different regional titles are listed by their North American titles (e.g., Moana *instead of* Vaiana*).*

As noted in the previous section, a number of issues arose concerning the identification of characters and the analysis of their social and linguistic characteristics. We will now describe each issue and how we resolved it. These considerations may prove fruitful for future studies that take a similar approach to the study of linguistic variation and discrimination in animated films and beyond.

Character identification

To identify characters for analysis, it initially seemed logical to rely on the list of speaking parts provided in the end credits of each film. However, these unreliable lists sometimes exclude characters with significant speaking parts, such as the French Dignitary in *Frozen* or Spamley in *Ralph Breaks the Internet*, and they sometimes include characters with no speaking parts, such as Ben in *Ralph Breaks the Internet* or the German Dignitary in *Frozen*. We decided instead to include in the analysis *all individual characters who speak a minimum of 10 words by themselves*, that is, not in unison with others so that their voices cannot be individuated. In all films except *Winnie the Pooh*, there are some very minor characters who speak fewer than 10 words, but their brief utterances do not provide enough linguistic material to determine their language variety with an acceptable degree of certainty. In addition, these minor characters are frequently impossible to individuate, either because they are only heard as part of a choir or because their voices are drowned out by coinciding noise. Finally, automated, disembodied voices, such as the Sugar Rush announcer in *Wreck-It Ralph* or the Internet announcer in *Ralph Breaks the Internet*, were not counted as characters and therefore not included in the analysis.

How to count characters who appear in more than one version? In the 12 analyzed films, this happens in two types of cases. First are characters whose age changes significantly over the course of a film. Younger and older versions of characters are typically voiced by different voice actors, as is the case with Anna and Elsa, the protagonists of the two *Frozen* films. The second type concerns characters who appear in multiple films. Anna and Elsa, for example, both appear in *Frozen*, *Frozen II*, and *Ralph Breaks the Internet*. For the purposes of this study, we decided to count different versions of a character as just one character. (Note that, because *Wreck-It Ralph* and *Ralph Breaks the Internet* have the same main character, the 12 analyzed films contain only 11 different protagonists.) This would have been problematic if different versions of the same character sometimes changed language variety, but there were no instances of this.

By these criteria, the 12 analyzed films contain a total of 273 characters with speaking roles.

Language variety

With some inconsistencies in the precise terminology used, Lippi-Green (2012) distinguished between Standard American English, Standard British English, "other English," foreign-accented English, and "peripheral" forms of American and British English. Stan-

dard American English designates that general variety of American English that is typical of professional and official communication in the United States. Similarly, Lippi-Green used "Standard British" to refer to that regionally neutral variety of British English that is typical of professional and official communication in the United Kingdom, and which is often termed Received Pronunciation. "Other English" describes other native varieties of English spoken outside the United States, such as Australian English. Lippi-Green mostly analyzed these other English varieties together with the British English language varieties under the rubric of "British or other English," and our shorthand of "other English" corresponds to this use. Foreign-accented English describes English spoken with a non-English accent, such as Japanese-accented or Spanish-accented English.

It is more difficult to interpret and deploy those of Lippi-Green's categories that include the non-standard notion of linguistic "peripherality," as Sønnesyn also notes (2011, p. 40). These categories describe dialects of English that are either "regionally peripheral" in characterizing a specific national region or "socially peripheral" in characterizing a particular social group. However, a significant overlap exists between regional dialects of English and dialects of English that are associated with particular social groups and characteristics. For example, U.S. Appalachian English is by definition regionally specific, but, as the "Hillbilly dialect," it is also a socially marginalized language variety (Dunstan & Jaeger, 2015; Luhman, 1990). It is therefore unclear whether to categorize this dialect as regionally or socially peripheral. Because of these overlaps, we resolved to collapse these two descriptors into one: "peripheral," which covers both regional and social peripherality. Apart from this revision, we adopted Lippi-Green's linguistic categories as they appear in the updated version (2012) of the original study (1997).

There are also concerns regarding the fit between these abstract linguistic categories and the unique and varying voices of individual characters. First, although most characters clearly exemplify a specific language variety, some diverge in significant ways. For example, Stu Hopps in *Zootopia* has some vaguely Southern American English features, and the villainous Mother Gothel in *Tangled* has transatlantic leanings, as evidenced by the absence of postvocalic /ɹ/ (*here* [hɪə]) and flapped /t/ (*utter* [ʌtʰə]). Cases like these inevitably require a judgment call: When, exactly, is some accent or dialect non-standard enough to warrant a non-standard label? We subjected such marginal cases to a review by a team of linguists and linguistically trained researchers, who were in all cases able to reach classificatory agreement by considering whether each character displayed *significant* and *consistent* deviations from the adjacent standard variety, in which case it was categorized as peripheral or foreign-accented. This team comprised one linguist and native speaker of American English, one linguist and non-native speaker of English, one linguistically trained native speaker of Canadian English, and two linguistically trained non-native speakers of English. In addition, a native New Zealander helped us identify several apposite accents in *Moana*.

Morality

We elaborated on the moral categories used by Lippi-Green (2012), who labeled characters' motivations and actions as either "positive" (sometimes "good"), "negative" (sometimes "evil"), "mixed," or "unclear." In our classification, only the main hero and their key helpers and associates are "Good," and only the main villain and their key helpers and associates are "Evil." We added the categories "Sympathetic" and "Unsympathetic" to describe relatively minor characters with a moral or immoral disposition, respectively. This means that Lippi-Green's label "positive" covers our labels of "Good" and "Sympathetic," and that her label "negative" covers our labels of "Evil" and "Unsympathetic." This change was made to enhance our study's analytic resolution; we reasoned that there might be interesting differences between centrally heroic or villainous characters and less prominently sympathetic or unsympathetic characters. The final two moral categories are the same as those used by Lippi-Green. Characters labeled as "Mixed" were those whose motivations and actions are morally mixed—which typically happens, as also noted by Lippi-Green (2012, p. 118), when an initially antagonistic character comes to realize the error of their ways toward the end of a film, as with Chief Tui in *Moana*. Labeled as "Unclear" were characters whose morality could not be identified because their motivations and actions are neither distinctively good nor bad. This is typically the case when a character's role is either very minor or when it is far removed from the concrete events of the story. For example, Peter Moosebridge has a significant speaking role in *Zootopia*, but, as a newscaster, he simply reports on the events of the story without assuming a moral stance toward them.

Gender

We did not encounter difficulties in identifying gender. All characters are conventionally and unambiguously represented, by various physical, vocal, and referential characteristics (e.g., names, pronouns), as being either male or female.

Age

We included age as a binary variable mostly to investigate whether certain language varieties would be more common in either "Younger" (children and young adults) or "Older" (middle-aged and older adults) characters. In cases where a character appears at significantly different ages, the character was categorized based on the age at which the character most frequently appears. For example, Nick Wilde in *Zootopia* appears as a child in a short flashback to his childhood; however, he mostly appears as an adult and was therefore categorized as "Older." In cases where a character's age could not be identified, the character's age was categorized as "Unclear." For example, the embodied computer virus of Arthur in *Ralph Breaks the Internet* is not represented as being either young or old in anthropomorphic terms.

Results

Using the method specified above, a total of 273 characters with significant speaking roles were identified and coded according to language variety, morality, gender, and age. This section reports our results and compares them with those of Lippi-Green.

Language variety

The distribution of language varieties in Disney's more recent films (Figure 2, below) differs notably from that in Lippi-Green's (2012) study. Two developments account for most of this shift: a marked reduction in the prevalence of varieties of British English (4.8 percent, down from 33 percent), and a corresponding increase in the prevalence of Standard American English (66.3 percent, up from 43 percent). Similar trends were identified by Sønnesyn (2011), but our results indicate that they are amplified in recent films. The prevalence of regionally and socially peripheral varieties of American English has increased slightly (17.2 percent, up from 13 percent) whereas the prevalence of foreign-accented English is virtually identical (9.9 percent, up from 9 percent). These foreign accents are mostly found in films that take place in non-anglophone regions of the real world, including *Moana* and *Encanto*, and they typically reference those regions. For example, Abuela Alma in *Encanto*, which takes place in Colombia, has a Colombian accent.

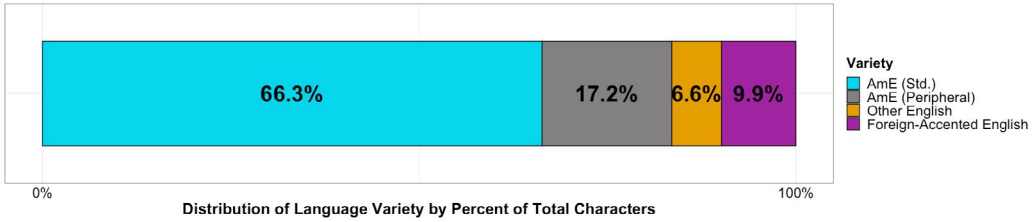

Figure 2 (cf. Lippi-Green 2012, Figure 7.7). The distribution of language varieties among the 273 analyzed characters. For absolute numbers, see Table 3, below.

Morality

With respect to their moral status, the 273 characters form a distribution that is very similar to that reported by Lippi-Green (2012). The prevalence of morally positive characters has slightly decreased (46.9 percent, down from 49.9 percent). The prevalence of morally negative characters is virtually identical (19.0 percent, down from 19.4 percent), as is the prevalence of morally mixed characters (8.1 percent, up from 7.5 percent). Finally, the prevalence of morally unclear characters has slightly increased (26.0 percent, up from 23.2 percent). Table 3, below, shows the total number of characters in each moral category.

Language variety and morality

The core of Lippi-Green's (2012) original study was the relationship between language and morality in Disney. She found that good and prosocial characters typically spoke American English, whereas evil and antisocial characters often had a foreign accent. In more recent films, this tendency has fully reversed such that foreign-accented characters are more moral than speakers of American English (Figures 3 and 4 and Table 3, below). The most significant factor here is that foreign-accented characters have become significantly more morally positive, but speakers of American English have also become less moral. Most immoral are older male speakers of American English language varieties (33 out of 75 characters whose morality could be identified).

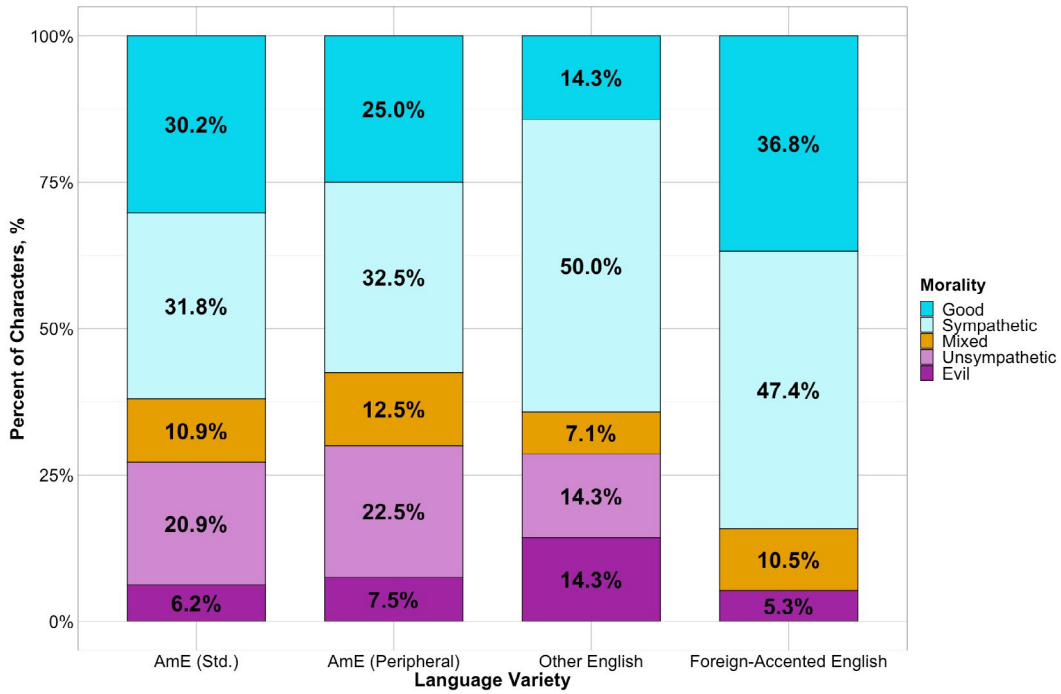

Figure 3 (cf. Lippi-Green 2012, Figure 7.8). Characters by language variety and moral status. This visualization excludes characters whose morality could not be identified.

	AmE (Standard)	AmE (Peripheral)	Other English	Foreign-Accented English	Total
Good	*n*=39	*n*=10	*n*=2	*n*=7	*n*=58
Sympathetic	*n*=41	*n*=13	*n*=7	*n*=9	*n*=70
Mixed	*n*=14	*n*=5	*n*=1	*n*=2	*n*=22
Unsympathetic	*n*=27	*n*=9	*n*=2	*n*=0	*n*=38
Evil	*n*=8	*n*=3	*n*=2	*n*=1	*n*=14
Unclear	*n*=52	*n*=7	*n*=4	*n*=8	*n*=71
Total	*n*=181	*n*=47	*n*=18	*n*=27	*n*=273

Table 3 (cf. Lippi-Green 2012, Table 7.4). Characters by language variety and moral status.

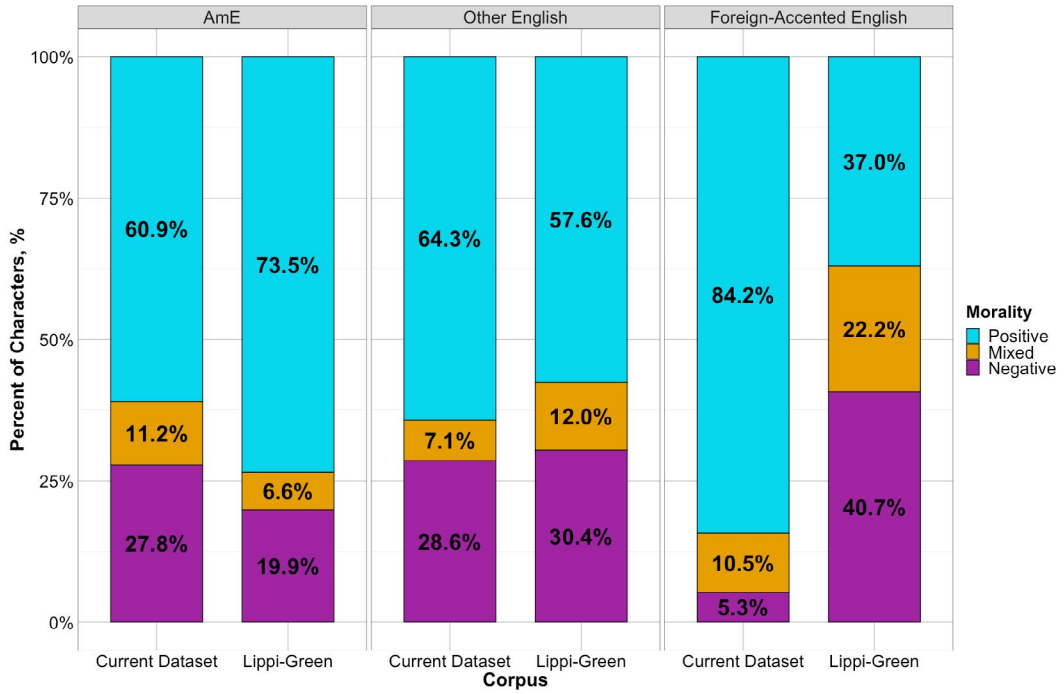

Figure 4. A direct comparison between the dataset of the present study and that of Lippi-Green (2012, Figure 7.8). This distribution excludes characters whose morality could not be identified. Note that the language variety "AmE" (American English) covers both Standard American English and peripheral varieties of American English. Lippi-Green did not report separate results for peripheral varieties of American English, as we do in Figure 3, above.

Characters with a regionally or socially peripheral American English dialect are slightly less moral than speakers of Standard American English. However, the difference is small enough that one can hardly speak of a discriminatory trend. Characters who speak a

native variety of English other than American English are about as moral as speakers of Standard American English.

Another way to survey the development is to contrast Standard American English, which Lippi-Green (2012) observed to be especially normative, with all other language varieties put together. In the recent films, of morally identifiable characters who speak Standard American English, 62.0 percent are morally positive and 27.1 percent are morally negative. Of morally identifiable characters who speak a language variety other than Standard American English, 65.8 percent are morally positive and 23.3 percent are morally negative. It therefore does not appear that Standard American English is morally normative in the more recent Disney films. However, nine out of the films' 11 different protagonists do speak Standard American English (the two exceptions are Tiana in *The Princess and the Frog* and Winnie the Pooh in *Winnie the Pooh*). We will briefly return to this point in the final section.

In terms of the language varieties of fully good and fully evil characters, the distributions are mostly consistent with what has already been said. It is not the case that fully good or villainous characters are generally speakers of one language variety in particular; rather, and as shown in Figure 3 and Table 3, above, these characters are roughly evenly distributed between different language varieties.

Gender

The 273 speaking parts divide into 177 male and 96 female characters, which represents a limited increase in the prevalence of female characters in the more recent films (35.2 percent, up from 30.2 percent). However, female protagonists, of whom there are eight, outnumber their male counterparts, of whom there are only three.

The tendency for female characters to be more morally sympathetic than male characters (Lippi-Green, 2012, p. 118) has increased. Of female characters, 58.3 percent are morally positive (up from 57.1 percent) and only 8.3 percent are morally negative (down from 19.6 percent). Of male characters, 40.7 percent are morally positive (down from 46.7 percent) and 24.9 percent are morally negative (up from 19.3 percent).

Lippi-Green (2012) observed that female characters were more passive and homely than male characters. We saw no evidence that this trend has carried through to the more recent films, in which female characters appear to be just as active, resourceful, and adventurous as male characters. However, to investigate the representation of gender roles per se was not a primary aim of this study. We refer the reader to recent work on gender representation in Disney (Fought & Eisenhauer, 2022; Hine et al., 2018; Muir, 2023; Wellman, 2020).

Age

The 273 characters divide into 83 (30.4 percent) "Younger" and 184 (67.4 percent) "Older" characters. The six remaining characters were not represented as having a specific anthro-

pomorphic age and were therefore categorized as "Unclear." These include the robotic beings of Baymax (*Big Hero 6*) and Arthur (*Ralph Breaks the Internet*), the snow monster of Marshmallow (*Frozen*), and three toy characters in *Winnie the Pooh*.

It may be surprising to see mostly "Older" characters in these films, whose primary audience is children. However, all main characters are children or young adults, and younger characters tend to fill more central roles than older characters. Moreover, these younger characters tend to be more moral than their elders. Of younger characters, 65.1 percent are morally positive and 10.8 percent morally negative, whereas 38.0 percent of older characters are morally positive and 22.8 percent are morally negative. These numbers support observations about the relative oldness of Disney villains (e.g., Robinson & Anderson, 2006), which makes them contrast more sharply with the young and vigorous protagonists.

Relationships between language variety, gender, and age

This section presents some further observations on the relationships between language, gender, and age in recent Disney films. An overview appears in Table 4, below.

	AmE (Standard)		AmE (Peripheral)		Other English		Foreign-Accented English	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
Younger	*n*=39	*n*=29	*n*=7	*n*=2	*n*=1	*n*=1	*n*=2	*n*=2
Older	*n*=29	*n*=78	*n*=8	*n*=30	*n*=1	*n*=15	*n*=9	*n*=14
Total	*n*=68	*n*=113	*n*=15	*n*=32	*n*=2	*n*=16	*n*=11	*n*=16

Table 4. Relationships between language, gender, and age. The total number of male speakers of Standard American English (113) includes the six characters whose age could not be identified.

One noteworthy trend is that female characters tend to be younger than male characters. Among younger characters, in fact, female characters outnumber male characters (49 to 34) despite the films' predominantly male cast. This is consistent with a Hollywood tendency to cast younger female than male actors (Hanssen & Fleck, 2012), which may reflect a feminine ideal of youthful beauty. Seventy point eight (70.8) percent of female characters speak Standard American English, while only 63.8 percent of male characters do so. This result is in line with observations by Lippi-Green (2012, p. 125) and Sønnesyn (2011, pp. 58–59), and it is consistent with the real-world, cross-cultural finding that "women on average use forms which more closely approach those of the standard variety or the prestige accent than those used by men" (Trudgill, 2000, p. 70). Female characters very rarely speak "other English" varieties. The two exceptions are Snow Leopard Newscaster in *Zootopia* (Standard British English) and Merida in *Ralph Breaks the Internet* (Scottish English).

Older characters show greater linguistic diversity than younger characters; they are more robustly represented among speakers of peripheral, foreign, and other English varieties, although a majority (58.2 percent) still speak Standard American English. Younger characters strongly incline toward Standard American English (81.9 percent), which could perhaps be explained as an attempt to make these characters more broadly relatable to younger U.S. audiences.

Discussion

Lippi-Green (2012) found in Disney's world of the 20th century a traditionalist realm of ethnolinguistic discrimination. In this world, male characters greatly outnumber the more moral and domestic female characters. There is some linguistic diversity, although Standard American English is spoken by nearly half of all characters, with varieties of British English also being common. Foreign-accented varieties of English are rare. Their presence often signals that the story is set in a non-English-speaking country. Speakers of American English tend to be good and moral, whereas speakers of other varieties of English, and of foreign-accented English in particular, are often untrustworthy and immoral.

Disney's world in the Revival Era looks considerably, albeit not completely, different. Male characters still outnumber female characters, but most main and younger characters are female. Female and younger characters tend to be significantly more moral than older and male characters. Linguistic diversity has decreased such that an even larger proportion of characters than before speak Standard American English. This development specifically reflects a reduction in the number of speakers of British English. Foreign-accented English remains rare but is quite common in films that take place in non-anglophone countries. Foreign-accented English is no longer associated with immorality; in fact, foreign-accented characters are more moral than speakers of American English. When speakers of Standard American English in particular are compared to speakers of all other language varieties put together, there is also no longer a tendency for speakers of Standard American English to be especially moral.

Two developments stand out. First is the dramatically lower percentage of characters who speak varieties of British English when compared to the percentage identified in previous Disney films by Lippi-Green (2012) (4.8 percent, down from 33 percent). One reason for this development is that only one of the more recent films, *Winnie the Pooh*, is set in Great Britain. This film has only 11 different characters, of whom three speak a British English language variety. By contrast, several older Disney films take place in Britain, and these films, such as *The Great Mouse Detective* (1986), have a good number of characters speaking varieties of British English. Another explanation may be that stereotypical uses of British English would now be seen as socially unacceptable. Disney may therefore be avoiding this particular "shortcut to characterization," resulting in less representation of British English language varieties. However, this could at most be a partial truth. The

recent Disney films do not have any sophisticated British English villains, but they do contain other stereotypical uses of British English, including for the wise Grandpa (*Frozen*, *Frozen II*), the uppity Heathcliff (*Big Hero 6*), and the effete and pathetic Lawrence (*The Princess and the Frog*). If anything, British English seems to be more likely than other language varieties to be stereotypically employed in recent Disney films. The reason, we speculate, is that the stereotypical use of British English is less socially inflammatory than the stereotypical use of (especially) foreign-accented forms of English, which may be seen as racist and therefore unacceptable.

The second major development is the de-stigmatization of foreign-accented English. Lippi-Green's original study found that, of the 27 foreign-accented characters whose morality could be determined, 10 were positive, 11 negative, and 6 mixed. In the more recent films, these numbers are 16, 1, and 2, respectively. (The single immoral foreign-accented character is the elderly Dang Hu, who threatens to turn the good Sisu into stone in *Raya and the Last Dragon*.) The biased pattern identified by Lippi-Green has therefore reversed such that foreign-accented characters in Disney's more recent films are distinctively good. The reason may be that Disney has become more aware of its discriminatory past as well as of a greater concern among its audiences with matters of social representation (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen & Schmidt, 2019). One reason to favor this interpretation is that Disney makes a visible point of it. The company's unskippable content warnings for those older films that have attracted the most criticism, such as *Peter Pan* (1953), currently begins: "This program contains negative depictions and/or mistreatment of people or cultures. These stereotypes were wrong then and they are wrong now." It seems that the company is taking special care not to be—or to be seen as—racist or otherwise discriminatory toward marginalized groups.

To these mostly positive findings of the present study should be added at least two qualifying considerations. First, morality is not the only normative dimension that can serve as a basis for negative representation and discrimination. It could still be that speakers of foreign-accented English and other non-standard language varieties are represented as less intelligent, competent, or physically attractive than speakers of Standard American English. Disney sometimes does seem to use certain accents and dialects to communicate negative or peculiar traits in ways that are often meant to be humorous. For example, the strongly Southern American English accent of Darnell in *The Princess and the Frog* seems to express his simplemindedness and lack of sophistication. This stereotype fits well with Kozloff's (2000, p. 82) observation that non-standard dialects in Hollywood have often been used to "represent characters as silly, quaint, or stupid." In addition, certain subtler kinds of linguistic discrimination are beyond the reach of the present investigation. Notable here is the queer portrayal of Disney villains (an oft-cited example is the feminization of Scar from *The Lion King*). Such "quillains," many of whom were found in 1990s Disney films, talk in ways that transgress the heteronormative ideology of the filmic universe, and this marks them out from other characters. Fought and Eisenhower (2022, Chapter

8) trace this tendency to the recent villainous characters of Mother Gothel from *Tangled* and Tamatoa from *Moana* (see also Putnam, 2013; Li-Vollmer & LaPointe, 2003).

Second, some aspects of Disney's linguistic approach are difficult to evaluate. For example, it seems good to recognize and represent the linguistic characteristics of different peoples and places, as Disney continues to do in those of its films that do not take place in an Americanized setting. On the other hand, the resultant mix of accents can appear random or incongruous, and as a shallow attempt to please everybody. Relatedly, there is an argument for having so many of Disney's protagonists speak Standard American English, which, by virtue of its recognized absence of narrowly regional, socioeconomic, or ethnic characteristics (Wolfram & Schilling, 2016, Chapter 1), may be widely inclusive and identifiable for the primary U.S. audience. Nonetheless, we believe it is desirable for Disney's protagonists to display—and therefore in an implicit way also to promote—linguistic diversity. Finally, although one would ultimately like to see a fully unbiased mediascape, Disney's discriminatory past arguably justifies a conscious attempt to portray foreign-accented characters positively in the company's more recent films. In any case, our data suggest that this may be happening.

It is not for the authors of this study to decide whether Disney has steered the right course in navigating such considerations, which link up with wider concerns about fair representation and the aims of social justice. What we are able to conclude is that Disney, whether acting from principled or prudential motives, has addressed what amounted to Lippi-Green's (2012) main criticism of its earlier films. At least with respect to the moral representation of non-standard language varieties, the company no longer appears to "teach discrimination."

Notes

1 Lippi-Green (1997, 2012) reports inconsistently on the percentages of characters who speak different varieties of American English. In the text of both versions of the study, 43.1 percent of characters are said to speak Standard American English, and 13.9 percent of characters are said to speak non-standard varieties of American English (1997, p. 87; 2012, p. 115). This adds up to 57.0 percent of characters speaking varieties of American English. However, both versions of the study also include a table that reports the total percentage of speakers of American English language varieties as 56.1 (1997, p. 90; 2012, p. 119). Adding to the confusion, both versions of the study also mention that a total of 161 characters speak Standard American English (1997, p. 93; 2012, p. 123), but that corresponds to 43.4 percent of the 371 analyzed characters rather than the reported 43.1 percent. These are minor discrepancies, and we will continue on the assumption that the percentages reported in Figure 5.3 in the 1997 version of the study and Figure 7.3 of the 2012 version of the study, which cover all linguistic categories and add up to 100 (but do not include decimal places), are correct.

2 We note that Lippi-Green (2012) in one place erroneously reports this percentage as 78.5 (p. 119; cf. Lippi-Green, 1997, p. 92).

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