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**Non-Standard English in Children's Movies:  
A Gender Perspective**

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**Title:** Non-Standard English in Children's Movies: A Gender Perspective

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**Abstract:** Sociolinguists have repeatedly demonstrated that men use more non-standard forms of English than women do and that this gender-related variation develops in early childhood. The present study has investigated whether these differences are reflected in gender-oriented movies targeting young children. Five movies intended primarily for boys and five movies targeting girls were examined for the use of one phonological and five grammatical features of non-standard English. The results supported the hypothesis that all six linguistic variables would be more prevalent in the boys' movies compared to the girls' movies. The present findings are discussed in relation to the respective findings of previous studies on gender expression in language as well as in reference to the gender of scriptwriters. Considering the fact that children spend an increasing amount of time watching television programs and movies, the language which they are exposed to through mass media requires further research.

**Keywords:** gender, gender-related variation, phonological and grammatical variables, non-standard English, media, children, sociolinguistics.

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## **1. Introduction**

Young children have the ability to acquire language at a rate that would make any adult learner of a second language green with envy. Children learn language by modelling the speech of their community, while simultaneously learning the cultural role that is assigned to them by society depending on their sex (Coates 1993). Our biological sex is innate and binary, but the cultural role of gender, which is the focus of sociolinguistic studies, is a social construction that exists along a continuum and is learned postnatally. In acquiring their socially constructed gender roles, children model the linguistic behaviour that is gender-appropriate for their culture by imitating same-sex role models. However, in today's media-driven society children also receive linguistic input from television and movies, and may internalise linguistic behaviour through this exposure. Previous research has repeatedly demonstrated that men and women differ in the way they speak, but is this difference also reflected in media specifically aimed at either boys or girls? The present study investigates whether differences between the genders in the use of non-standard English features are present in the language used in gender-oriented movies for children.

### **1.1 Aim and hypothesis**

The aim of the present study is to examine whether there is a difference in the use of *ain't*, reduced forms, negative concord, non-standard verb forms, *get*-passives and the pronunciation of *-ing* in films that target young girls and films that target young boys. The use of these features has been found by sociolinguists to display gender-related tendencies, one of them being a tendency for male speech to have more non-standard forms than female speech. Thus, the hypothesis tested in this study is that all these

non-standard features occur more frequently in the movies aimed at boys compared to the movies aimed at girls.

## **2. Previous research**

In the feminist work *Language and Woman's Place* (1975), Robin Lakoff described women's language based on introspect and her own observations. By suggesting that women's speech differed from men's in several important aspects, she led the way into a new era of language and gender studies. For instance, Lakoff argued that women use more hedges, tag questions and polite forms as well as more hypercorrect grammar and pronunciation than men. Subsequent research has supported Lakoff's observation that women use fewer non-standard forms than men (Trudgill 1972, Macaulay 1977, 1978, Newbrook 1986, Ladegaard 1998, Bell *et.al.* 2003), and this tendency appears to be a difference between the genders that is acquired in early childhood. Hudson and Holmes (1995) recorded the speech of 11- and 15-year-olds and found that girls used fewer non-standard forms than boys in both age groups. Similar results were obtained by Cheshire (1982) and Romaine (1978, 1984) in community studies examining non-standard linguistic features in children. In addition, Romaine (1984) discovered that children develop the skill and awareness of style switching somewhere between the age of 6 and 10, which suggests that it is during these years that children learn to distinguish between standard and non-standard language.

The above-mentioned extensive research in the field of sociolinguistics provides a strong indication that gender differentiation in language exists and is noticeable already in childhood. However, the explanation behind these differences varies according to different researchers. Lakoff (1975) interpreted women's speech

as a sign of tentativeness and unassertiveness that was due to women's subordinate position in society. An explanation presented by Trudgill (1972) suggests that women potentially are more status-conscious than men and use language to signal their social status. He further mentions that non-standard language is associated with working-class men and hence is not a desirable feminine attribute. Holmes (2008) also argues that non-standard language varieties carry connotations of masculinity and are associated with toughness and roughness.

This study examines gender variations in six specific non-standard features in English that have previously shown differences between the genders or have been reported to be overused by children. Each of these features is discussed with reference to previous research in the following paragraphs.

### **2.1 *Ain't***

The non-standard form *ain't* is a very common feature in most American and British English non-standard varieties. One reason to its widespread usage is that it can function as the present tense negative form with all persons of the verb in three different constructions: with the auxiliary *be*, the auxiliary *have* and the copula *be*. Hence *ain't* is used in sentences such as “*He ain't leaving yet*”, “*I ain't been to London*” and “*She ain't happy*”. *Ain't* constituted one of the non-standard features of English in a study conducted by Cheshire (1982) in the British town of Reading. She wanted to examine sociolinguistic variation in spontaneous speech and did so by spending time at an adventure playground where she managed to be accepted by and interact with children in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere. There were three groups in the study, two groups of boys with an average age of 14 and one with girls averaging an age of 12. The results revealed that the frequency of *ain't* was

significantly higher for the boys in both groups compared to the girls in each of the three constructions. These results reflected Cheshire's findings in a previous study (1981) where a group of girls used all constructions of *ain't* less often than the boys. A more recent study on the speech of London teenagers by Stenström (1997) also supports these findings of gender differences in the use of *ain't*.

## **2.2 Reduced forms**

Reduced forms or phrases refer to the feature in English whereby two or more words are spoken as one. These forms are generated when unstressed function words are contracted, deleted, assimilated or reduced to combine with other function words or content words of a sentence. Common reduced forms in English are *gonna* for *going to*, *wanna* for *want to*, *outta* for *out of*, *gotta* for *got to* and *lotta* for *lot of*. These forms are extremely widespread in spoken English, but are rare in written language. Based on studies of other non-standard features in English it would be expected that men would use more reduced forms than women. In alignment with this expectation, Berglund (1999) discovered in her analysis of the British National Corpus that the reduced form *gonna*, as a contraction of *going to*, was used more frequently by men compared to women.

## **2.3 Negative Concord**

Negative concord or multiple negation, such as "*I don't know nothing*" or "*He didn't use no knife*", is a grammatical variable that occurs when two or more negative elements are used in the same sentence. Despite the fact that Standard English today forms negation by using only one negative element per sentence, multiple negation is common in many British and American non-standard dialects. Wolfram (1969, cited

in Chambers 2003) found that men across all social classes used more multiple negations compared to women of the same class. In the Reading study (Cheshire 1982), boys used negative concord 87% of the time, which was significantly more compared to 52% for the girls.

#### **2.4 Non-standard verb forms**

There are several non-standard verb forms in English, but the present study will focus on subject-verb agreement. Cheshire (1982) looked at different non-standard subject-verb agreements used by children in Reading and the results revealed differences in gender-related tendencies. Thus, as predicted, girls used the non-standard past tense form of *be* less than boys in regards to *was*. However, the results for *were* did not show a clear gender-specific difference, since girls tended to use more non-standard *were*, while boys used more non-standard *weren't*. Studying the occurrence of the present tense form of *have* also provided varied results. Boys used non-standard *have+infinitives* more frequently, while there was no gender difference found in the use of non-standard *have* as a main verb.

#### **2.5 Get-passives**

In English there are two ways of forming the passive, either by using the standard *be*-passive as in “*She was hit*” or through the non-standard *get*-passive as in “*She got hit*”. Non-standard dialects rely heavily on the *get*-passive to form passive voice (Labov 1969) and so do children (Harris & Flora 1982). In their study on young children’s formation of passive constructions, Harris and Flora (1982) found that preschool and elementary school children used significantly more *get*-passives than *be*-passives when modelling and producing sentences, and they also appeared to



comprehend *get*-passives better than *be*-passives. However, gender variation was not a variable in the study. Hence, there is no previous indication that boys use *get*-passives more often than girls.

## **2.6 Pronunciation of *-ing***

Thus far, the non-standard forms discussed have been categories of grammatical variation, which is far from being the only variable under scrutiny in linguistics. Sociolinguists also analyse phonological variations in the population and one such variable is the pronunciation of the suffix *-ing*. The final sound in the suffix *-ing*, in words such as *running* or *talking*, can be pronounced either with the standard velar nasal [ŋ] or non-standard alveolar [n], and the same applies to the ending in compound words such as *anything* or *nothing*. Trudgill (1974) examined the pronunciation of the suffix *-ing* in Norwich and found differences across gender and social class at four levels of formal and informal speech. The findings revealed that the non-standard form [ɪn] was extremely common in the lower-working-class group and relatively rare in the middle-class groups across all levels of formality, even though there was a clear tendency in all groups to use the non-standard form more in casual speech compared to formal style interviews. The same was true with gender, since men used the non-standard form more than women across all social classes. The group that was most likely to use [ɪn] was the lower-working-class males, who consistently used the non-standard form in most levels of formality. The findings indicate that the standard [ɪŋ] is the prestige form that is used by the higher social classes and also in more careful speech. It also appears to be the form preferred by women, while men have a preference for the non-standard [ɪn]. Further support for this conclusion was attained in a self-evaluation form where women tended to over-

report their use of the prestige form, while men tended to under-report their usage, suggesting that the non-standard form has positive connotations for men (Trudgill 1972).

The same gender differentiation in the pronunciation of the *-ing* ending was detected by Fischer (1964) in a study of child rearing in a New England village. In two groups of children (3-6 year olds and 7-10 year olds), Fischer recorded interviews and counted the incidences of [ɪn] and [ɪŋ] for the boys and girls, which revealed that girls used the non-standard form [ɪn] less than boys. The differences were statistically significant and Fischer concluded that the children had learned that in their speech community the non-standard form was a feature of male speech and the standard form a feature of female speech.

## **2.7 Children and media**

Recent decades have yielded an astonishing progress in the development of media outlets, and children today can choose from a multitude of television programmes, movies, video games and Internet sites. Studies investigating television and video viewing habits of young American children have found that children under the age of 11 watch television programmes or videos between 18 hours (Christakis *et.al.* 2004) and 26 hours per week (Dennison *et.al.* 2004). Silverblatt (2001) argues that the messages, which viewers receive through media, can affect behaviour, attitudes and values. The genres that have the strongest impact on children's lives are commercials, cartoons, situation comedies and for older children action/adventure programmes. Frequent viewers are more likely to accept television as realistic and make decisions in life based on this artificial social reality. Career choices as well as gender role perceptions have shown to be affected by television viewing (Singer 1998).

### 3. Material

Five movies were chosen for each gender and the details of the movies are presented in Appendix A. Dividing children's movies into boys' and girls' movies can present problems and should be done with caution. The method I composed for this division is based on the targeting of merchandise<sup>1</sup>, such as clothes, toys and bicycles, which have been promoted and sold in relation to the movies. This merchandise is usually divided into girls' and boys' items in stores and Internet shops by using separate aisles or headings. Hence, this reveals an intention by the production companies to target a specific gender. In order for a movie to be considered a "girls' movie" in this study, the merchandise associated with it had to be aimed mainly at girls. The same criteria applied for the boys' movies, where the majority of the merchandise had to target boys.. Another requirement was that the boys' movies had to include a main male character and the girls' movies a main female character. These characters could be depicted as humans, animals or objects, as long as they were clearly assigned a gender.

There were another two criteria for the selection of movies. First, the primary target group for the movies had to be children between the ages of four and ten. Second, the year of production had to be within a certain time frame to remove any bias caused by changes in language over time. The allowed time frame in the present study was set to approximately a decade.

Among the selected movies, nine were computer-animated and one was an animated classic (*Cinderella III- a Twist in Time*). All the movies were produced in the United States.

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<sup>1</sup> This gender division focused only on items that had *for boys* or *for girls* in the item description, since some merchandise associated with the movies could be considered "gender-neutral".

#### **4. Method**

To the extent that scripts were available on the Internet, these were used as templates and proofread while watching the movies. Scripts were available for all movies except *Tinkerbell* and *Barbie and Princess Charm School*, which were transcribed with the aid of subtitles. One important issue was that most of the movies contained music that was played either in the background or as part of the story. Some of the songs were written specifically for the movie, while others were pre-existing popular songs with an unrelated origin. Only the lyrics from songs written specifically for the movie, which also featured as part of the story line and were sung by one of the characters, were included in this study.

The occurrences of non-standard words and non-standard grammar were counted and compared between the genders. Special attention was directed towards the pronunciation of *-ing* [ɪŋ] versus *-in'* [ɪn] and the variations noted in the scripts. In all instances where an *-ing* ending could be pronounced either *-ing* or *-in'*, which included the suffix endings in *singing* or *walking* as well as the ending of compound words such as *something* or *nothing*, the occurrences of *-in'* were counted and a percentage calculated. However, the collection of data in this study does not include the gender of the characters using the non-standard forms.

#### **5. Results**

The scope of the material turned out to be uneven for the genders, with boys' movies containing both a greater number of words and lasting longer than the girls' movies. As presented in Table 1, the boys' movies included on average 9,000 words and lasted for 100 minutes, while the girls' movies contained on average 5,500 words and continued for 80 minutes. Consequently, there were 85 words spoken per minute in

the boys' movies, compared to 66 words per minute in the girls' movies. Hence, there were not only more words spoken in total in the boys' movies, but also a greater amount of words per minute. In order to account for the discrepancy in scope, the number of incidences per 1,000 words was calculated and used as a comparison.

Table 1: The average scope of the girl's movies and the boys' movies

	Girls' movies	Boys' movies
No of words	5500	9000
Duration in minutes	80	100
No of words/minute	66	85
Male voices in %	25	77
Female voices in %	75	23
Song lyrics in %	12	0,4

In order to see to what extent females or males dominated the scope in the movies, the number of words uttered by each gender was counted and a percentage calculated. The result showed that significantly more words were spoken by females in the girls' movies, with 75% spoken by females compared to 25% by males. In the boys' movies, the difference was reverse, with 77% of the words spoken by males and a mere 23% by females.

Lyrics from songs that were specifically written for the films comprised as much as 12% of the words in the girls' movies. In the boys' movies, lyrics from the included songs constituted only 0,4% of the words.

## 5.1 *Ain't*

The feature *ain't* only occurred once in the girls' movies and it was spoken by a male character in *Tangled*. In this case *ain't* was used instead of the copula BE+*not*. In Table 2, this single instance of 1 is presented as well as the incidence per 1,000 words, which was 0,04 for the girls' movies.

Table 2: Frequency indices for *ain't* in girls' versus boys' movies

	Raw frequency		Incidences / 1000 words	
	Girls' movies	Boys' movies	Girls' movies	Boys' movies
Aux. BE + not	0	16	0	0,36
Aux. HAVE +not	0	4	0	0,09
Copula BE + not	1	19	0,04	0,42
Total	1	39	0,04	0,87

In the boys' movies, the frequency of *ain't* was greater than in the girls' movies. In total, *ain't* occurred 39 times, which is equivalent to 0,87 incidences per 1,000 words. In the majority of occurrences, the utterance was replacing either the auxiliary BE+*not* or the copula BE+*not*. Examples of *ain't* from the movies are:

- 1) "...you *ain't* leavin' Sunnyside." (auxiliary BE+*not*)
- 2) "Relax, these train tracks *ain't* been used in years!" (auxiliary HAVE+*not*)
- 3) "His arm *ain't* that bad." (copula BE+*not*)

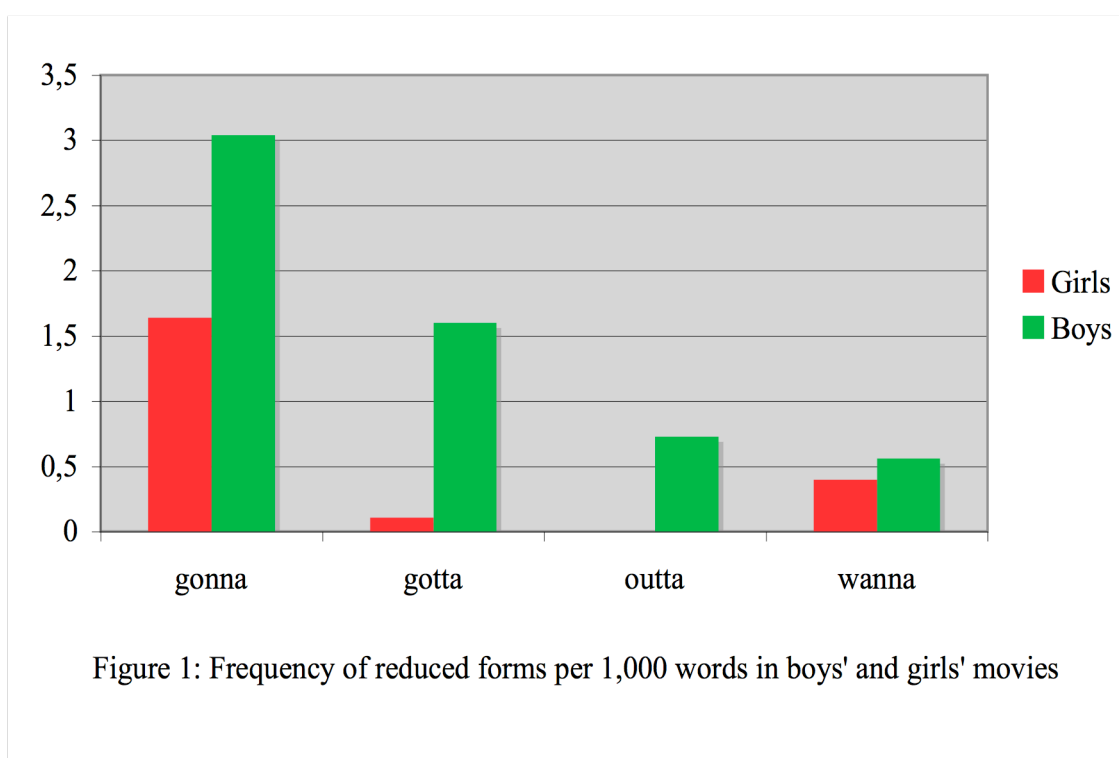
## 5.2 Reduced forms

Reduced forms that were frequently uttered in the movies were *gonna*, *outta*, *gotta* and *wanna*. Other reduced forms, such as *lotta*, *gotcha* and *lemme*, did occur, but they were too infrequent to be included in the study. Overall, reduced forms were much more common in boys' movies compared to girls' movies. The four reduced forms

occurred 267 times with the incidence 5,93 per 1,000 words in the boys' movies compared to 59 occurrences with the incidence 2,15 in the girls' movies (Table 3).

Table 3: Frequency indices of reduced forms in girls' and boys' movies

	Raw frequency		Incidences / 1000 words	
	Girls' movies	Boys' movies	Girls' movies	Boys' movies
gonna	45	137	1,64	3,04
gotta	3	72	0,11	1,60
outta	0	33	0	0,73
wanna	11	25	0,4	0,56
Total	59	267	2,15	5,93



As presented in Figure 1, each of the reduced forms *gonna*, *gotta*, *outta* and *wanna*, were used more frequently in the boys' movies compared to the girls' movies. The most common reduced form was *gonna*, which occurred 137 times in the boys' films and 45 times in the girls' films. It should be noted that out of the 45 occasions in

the girls' movies, 15 were part of a repeated chorus in a song. A contrast between the incidences 1,64 for the girls' movies and 3,04 for the boys' movies indicates that there are gender-related differences in the use of *gonna*.

- 4) "*Are we gonna do this all night?*" (boys' movie)
- 5) "*Who's gonna be a lady royal?*" (girls' movie)

The greatest difference between girls' movies and boys' movies was found for the reduced form *gotta*, which appeared 72 times in the boys' movies compared to 3 times in the girls' movies. In incidences per 1,000 words, the contrast is 0,11 in the girls' movies and 1,60 in the boys' movies.

- 6) "*I gotta admit - you tricked us real good.*" (boys' movie)
- 7) "*Gotta be excited about that.*" (girls' movie)

There was also a remarkable difference in the frequency of the reduced form *outta*, as the form did not occur in the girls' movies, but its instances in the boys' movies amounted to 33.

- 8) "*Molly, stay outta my room!*" (boys' movie)

As for the final form *wanna*, even though there were more occurrences of this form in the boys' movies, the difference was not as great as in the case of other reduced forms. The raw frequency for *wanna* was 11 and incidences per 1,000 words were 0,4 for the girls' movies and the equivalent figures for the boys' movies were 25 and 0,56.

- 9) "*I don't wanna play with you anymore.*" (boys' movie)
- 10) "*I never wanna see her again.*" (girls' movie)



### 5.3 Negative concord

There were no instances of double or multiple negations in any of the girls' movies.

In the boys' movies, double negation was reported on 26 occasions, which is the equivalent of 0,58 incidences per 1,000 words. Examples of double negation from the boys' movies are presented below:

- 11) "Don't tell nobody."
- 12) "I didn't do nothin'."
- 13) "I don't wanna hear none of this "Sir" business."
- 14) "You ain't going nowhere."

### 5.4 Non-standard verb forms

In regards to non-standard verb forms, there was no incidence of these forms in any of the girls' movies. However, there were 37 non-standard forms found in the boys' movies, which amounts to 0,82 incidences per 1,000 words. The non-standard verb forms were divided into four categories.

The first category was the non-standard present tense form of *be* and, as presented in Table 4, the raw frequency for this type of error was 12 and the incidence per 1,000 words 0,27. These forms were found in sentences such as:

- 15) "Some of them fellers is really loud."
- 16) "Wow, not only is you the prettiest car..."

Table 4: Frequency indices for non-standard verb forms in girls' and boys' movies.

	Raw frequency		Incidences / 1000 words	
	Girls' movies	Boys' movies	Girls' movies	Boys' movies
NS present tense <i>be</i>	0	12	0	0,27
NS past tense <i>be</i>	0	11	0	0,24
NS present tense <i>do</i>	0	4	0	0,09
Omittance 3 <sup>rd</sup> person -s	0	10	0	0,22
Total	0	37	0	0,82

Another type of verb form occurring in the boys' movies was the non-standard past tense form of *be*. This form had a raw frequency of 11, which is equivalent to 0,24 incidences per 1,000 words. Examples from the movies are:

- 17) "*I was wonderin' when you was gonna wake up.*"
- 18) "*If anybody asks you, we was out smashin' mailboxes*".

The non-standard present tense form of *do* formed the third category, with a raw frequency of 4 and 0,09 occurrences per 1,000 words. This form appeared in sentences such as:

- 19) "*She don't love you no more*".

The final category was the omittance of the standard 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular *-s*, and this form had a raw frequency of 10 and 0,22 incidences per 1,000 words. An example from the text:

- 20) "*Luigi follow only the Ferraris*".

All these forms are interpreted as concord errors in school grammars of Standard English.

### **5.5 Get passives**

*Get* passives were not found in any of the girls' movies. In the boys' movies *get*-passives appeared on 33 occasions, which is equivalent to 0,73 incidences per 1,000 words.

- 21) "*We're getting thrown away.*"
- 22) "*I got broke*"

## 5.6 Pronunciation of *-ing*

In the girls' movies, there were 600 occurrences where the ending *-ing* could be pronounced either with a standard *-ing* [ɪŋ] or a non-standard *-in'* [ɪn]. In the boys' movies this number was 1227. As presented in Table 5, the raw frequency of the non-standard *-in'* was 17 in the girls' movies, and the corresponding number was 315 in the boys' movies. That is 0,62 incidences in the girls' movies versus 7 in the boys' movies.

Table 5: Frequencies of the non-standard pronunciation *-in'* in boys' movies and girls' movies

	Raw Frequency	Incidences/1,000 words	Percentage
Girl's movies	17	0,62	3
Boys' movies	315	7	26

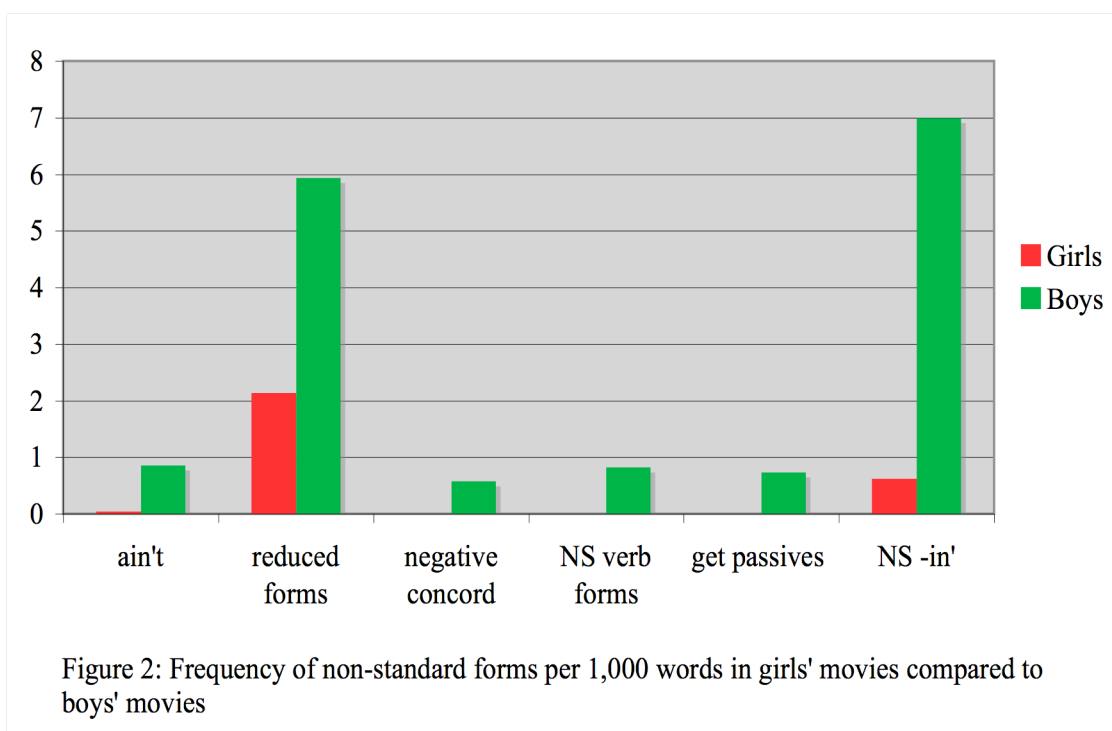
Further calculations revealed that the non-standard pronunciation *-in'* occurred in 26% of the cases in the boys' movies, whereas the corresponding number was 3% in the girls' movies. One example from the boys' movies contained several non-standard *-in'*:

- 23) *"There will be no bumpin', no cheatin', no spittin', no bittin', no road rage, no maimin', no oil slickin', no pushin', no shovin', no backstabbin', no road-hoggin' and no lollygaggin'."*

## 5.7 Summary results

To sum up, all the non-standard variables were more frequent in the boys' movies compared to the girls' movies. The grand total of non-standard features in the boys'

movies was 16 incidences per 1,000 words, compared to 3 in the girls' movies. The overall results are presented in Figure 2.



A final observation discloses that there were many sentences and paragraphs in the boys' movies that included several of the examined variables as well as other non-standard features, for example slang such as *goners* or the non-standard use of irregular verbs such as *knowed/knew* and *drawed/drawn*. The analysis of these non-standard features could be part of future research. A few illustrative examples are:

- 24) "Boy, I was wonderin' when you was gonna wake up."
- 25) "I'm startin' to think he knowed you was gonna crash!"
- 26) "So there I was: rocket jets goin' full blast, McQueen hangin' on for dear life when suddenly them two nasty lemons come out of nowhere, guns drawed. We was goners."
- 27) "You and your friends ain't ever gettin' outta here now."
- 28) "But if you don't take out that Monkey, you ain't goin' nowhere. Y'wanna get outta here? Get ridda that Monkey!"
- 29) "I love you, but if we're gonna make this work, you've gotta be more than Mr. Incredible."

## 6. Discussion

The results supported the hypothesis that the non-standard features would occur with a higher frequency in movies aimed at boys than in movies aimed at girls. The most prominent difference was found for the pronunciation of the ending *-ing* and this discrepancy in the frequency of non-standard [ɪn] instances in boys' versus girls' movies reflects gender variation in previous findings (Fischer 1964, Trudgill 1972). In congruence with Fischer's and Trudgill's studies, the findings were striking since the non-standard [ɪn] occurred 11 times (if counting incidences per 1,000 words) more often in the boys' movies compared to the girls' movies. The results of the present study also revealed noteworthy gender-related differences in the use of reduced forms, in particular the forms *gonna* and *gotta*. The higher frequency of reduced forms in the boys' movies demonstrates a gender-bound variation that is similar to Berglund's (1999) findings which showed that men use *gonna* to a greater extent than women.

Although the boys' movies contained a higher frequency of non-standard features across all the variables, the difference may not appear apparent in all instances. However, when frequencies are compared in terms of incidences per 1,000 words across all variables, gender-related contrasts are manifest. Thus, the grand total of non-standard features was 16 incidences in the boys' movies, which is more than five times as many as the 3 incidences found in the girls' movies. How would these results transfer to everyday life if we make a rough generalisation? Children watch approximately 3 hours of video or television per day (Christakis *et.al.* 2004, Dennison *et.al.* 2004); thus in accordance with the information on the use of the non-standard forms gathered in this particular study, girls would hear 37 non-standard language forms per day, while boys would hear 257 instances of such forms daily if they

predominantly watch gender specific movies. This comparison is only based on the six non-standard features examined in this study and there are many other features to research, which may reveal even more serious gender-related contrasts in the way language is used in gender-oriented movies targeting young children. However, the above comparison was only a speculation that should not be interpreted as a real-life observation. In real life, children are likely to watch an array of movies and television shows, which are not always gender specific.

The results in this study indicate that boys on average are exposed to more non-standard features of English when they watch movies compared to girls. Since men use more non-standard English than women, boys already assimilate this way of speaking from their male role models and the language in the movies will further reinforce this use of non-standard English. Girls, on the other hand, are more likely to imitate female models' of speaking and this gender-oriented exposure to Standard English is reinforced by the language communicated in movies.

Coates (1986:144) argues that children "...demonstrate their membership of the group by their use of gender-appropriate behaviour, and this includes gender-appropriate *linguistic* behaviour." In other words, language forms a great part of our identities and discloses our community membership as well as gender identity. The gender differences in language survive through generations as "becoming linguistically competent, the child learns to be a fully fledged male or female member of the speech community; conversely, when children adopt linguistic behaviour considered appropriate to their gender they perpetuate the social order which creates gender distinctions." (Coates 1986:144). The efforts in today's societies to achieve gender equality pay relatively little attention to the gender-oriented variation in language that boys and girls are exposed to through media, even though media may be

part of the forces that maintain the differences between the genders through the generations.

There is an expression stating that songwriters have a 'poetic licence' and are allowed to bend language rules to fit rhyming patterns and the rhythm of the music. Based on previous findings that show a connection between song lyrics and an increase in non-standard English features (Mangseth, 2010), the girls' movies in the present study ought to have had higher incidences of non-standard features since they included 12% song lyrics compared to 0,4% in the boys' movies. In the variable reduced forms and particularly the form *gonna*, 15 out of the 45 raw frequency hits in girls' movies were from the chorus of one song in the movie *Barbie and the Diamond castle*. The form was used in order to fit into the melody of the chorus. Despite the high frequency of *gonna* in this song, which amounted to 30% of the total number of occurrences in the girls' movies, the reduced form was nevertheless used more often in the boys' movies. This demonstrates that regardless of the non-standard trap of song lyrics that is present in the girls' movies, the girls' movies still have fewer incidences of non-standard features per 1,000 words than the boys' movies.

The question is whether the movie producers are aware of how they utilize language in children's movies. Is the difference intentional or are other factors involved? The survey of the gender of the screenwriters has revealed that 31% of the writers were females in the girls' movies, and only 10% were females in the boys' movies. Thus, the female writers that worked on the boys' movies were outnumbered by males and formed a small minority. In three of the girls' movies the female writers had a greater input and even formed majorities (100%, 50% and 25%). At the same time, the remaining two girls' movies were written solely by male writers. This indicates that the gender of the scriptwriters could have had an effect on the language

in the boys' movies, though this effect is not as patent in the girls' movies. However, there is also an indication that the writers have the "appropriate" linguistic behaviour of the target gender in mind when they are producing the scripts. There could be an underlying belief that boys and girls will more easily relate to the characters in the movies if the characters' linguistic behaviours resemble that of the target gender. Girls would probably not feel akin to a character who used an abundance of non-standard language features, neither would they be encouraged to imitate this use of language by their community. Another possibility is that instead of having the target gender in mind, the writers may have simply tried to imitate the natural language produced by each gender for their characters. Since the majority of words in the girls' movies are spoken by females, the writers have used gender appropriate language for their characters and subsequently included few non-standard features. The opposite is then evident for the boys' movies where males spoke 77% of the words.

The use of stereotypical non-standard accents was more prevalent in the boys' movies and this could present another reason for the gender discrepancies since some of these accents are associated with certain non-standard English features. For example, there is an Italian car in *Cars* and *Cars 2* that does not use 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular *-s*. Only a negligible number of prominent characters speak with a stereotypical non-standard accent in the girls' movies.

Sociolinguists have suggested several explanations to the variation between the genders. Trudgill (1972) and Holmes (2008) argued that non-standard language is associated with working-class men and carries connotations of masculinity. This association between non-standard language and toughness and roughness is evident in the character Mater in the boys' movies *Cars* and *Cars 2*. Mater is a rusty, dented tow truck that is a little rough around the edges. He is a kind, loyal and funny character



who in the beginning appears obtuse, but who redeems himself in the second movie by solving the mysterious case that had left everyone else perplexed. In the end Mater is not just a funny guy; he is a hero. This lower-working-class hero is a “red-neck” who speaks with a Southern accent and uses more non-standard language than any other character in the movies examined in this study<sup>2</sup>. Mater’s language is an important part of his identity, and the use of non-standard English features by this particular character is certainly not a coincidence. The language the writers have chosen for this working-class male character suggests that there is a distinct association between masculinity and non-standard English. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that a main character in the boys’ movies can speak with a heavy accent and use an abundance of non-standard language, while all the main female characters in the girls’ movies speak with a General American accent and use Standard English.

It is important to be aware of the fact that the language in all of the examined movies is fictitious and should not be treated as natural speech. The writers’ aim is to produce a script that resembles real-life spoken language, but it is nevertheless written language produced by adults targeting young viewers. To what extent children realise this is another matter and they may very well treat the language in the movies as natural speech. Further research into children’s perception of fictitious language is needed to establish this point.

The present study only examined movies and it would be interesting to see if similar results could be found in gender-oriented television programmes and video games aimed at children. Additional information in regards to what extent children watch television programmes and movies that are aimed at their specific gender

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<sup>2</sup> Mater and the language he uses may have been overrepresented in the results, since both *Cars* and *Cars 2* were included in this study.

would be valuable in order to see what choices children make. Further research is also needed to see if the increased exposure to non-standard language in media actually affects the way children speak.

## **6.1 Conclusion**

The present study has revealed a higher frequency of non-standard language forms in movies aimed at boys compared to movies aimed at girls. Thus, the results provided by the analysis of some grammatical and phonetic variables supported this study hypothesis as well as the findings of gender differences in previous research. The variation in language may be due to a combination of factors such as the gender of the scriptwriters and an attempt to imitate the language of the target gender in order to enhance children's ability to relate to characters. Even though the language in the movies is fictitious and cannot be treated as natural speech, researchers should be careful in dismissing the results of such studies. Children spend an increasing amount of time watching television programmes and movies and thus receive language input from the media several hours per day. It would be surprising if they were not influenced by this exposure. The variations between gender-oriented movies in this study are too great to ignore, and as children tend to spend more and more time in front of the screen, these differences are worth further examination.

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## **Appendix A**

### Movies for boys:

#### **Cars**

Lasseter, John, Ranft, Joe, Klubien, Jorgen, Chapman, Brenda, Fogelman, Dan, Murray, Kiel, Lorin, Phil, Baird, Robert L., Gerson, Daniel, Hunt, Bonnie, Lake, Don, Purcell, Steve & Scanlon, Dan  
Walt Disney Pictures & Pixar Animation Studios, 2006  
Number of words: 10,020  
Duration in minutes: 117  
Gender of writers: 2 females, 11 males

#### **Cars II**

Queen, Ben, Lasseter, John, Lewis, Brad & Fogelman, Dan  
Walt Disney Pictures & Pixar Animation Studios, 2011  
Number of words: 10,750  
Duration in minutes: 106  
Gender of writers: 4 males

#### **The Incredibles**

Bird, Brad  
Walt Disney Pictures & Pixar Animation Studios, 2004  
Number of words: 8,750  
Duration in minutes: 115  
Gender of writers: 1 male

#### **Toy Story II**

Lasseter, John, Docter, Pete, Brannon, Ash, Stanton, Andrew, Hsiao, Rita, Chamberlin, Doug & Webb, Chris  
Walt Disney Pictures & Pixar Animation Studios, 1999  
Number of words: 8,040  
Duration in minutes: 92  
Gender of writers: 1 female, 6 males

#### **Toy Story III**

Lasseter, John, Stanton, Andrew, Unkrich, Lee & Arndt, Michael  
Walt Disney Pictures & Pixar Animation Studios, 2010  
Number of words: 7,580  
Duration in minutes: 103  
Gender of writers: 4 males

Movies for girls:

**Barbie and the Diamond Castle**

Lesser, Elana & Ruby, Cliff  
Mattel & Rainmaker Entertainment, 2008  
Number of words: 5,260  
Duration in minutes: 79  
Gender of writers: 1 female, 1 male

**Barbie and Princess Charm School**

Allen, Elise & Rocky, Kati  
Barbie Entertainment & Rainmaker Entertainment, 2011  
Number of words: 5,900  
Duration in minutes: 81  
Gender of writers: 2 females

**Cinderella III– a twist in time**

Berendsen, Daniel, Heidenry, Margaret, Millea Ventimilia, Colleen, Guzelian, Eddie, Bencich, Steve, Friedman, Ron J., Reece, Robert & Spiliotopoulos, Evan  
DisneyToon Studios, 2007  
Number of words: 4,700  
Duration in minutes: 70  
Gender of writers: 2 females, 6 males

**Tangled**

Fogelman, Dan  
Walt Disney Animated Studios & Walt Disney Pictures, 2010  
Number of words: 6,890  
Duration in minutes: 100  
Gender of writers: 1 male

**Tinkerbell**

Barrie, James M., Howard, Jeffrey M. & Raymond, Bradley  
DisneyToon Studios & Prana Studios, 2008  
Number of words: 4,650  
Duration in minutes: 78  
Gender of writers: 3 males