

Boast and bellow, giggle or chatter: gender and verbs of speech in children's fiction

Sally Hunt (Rhodes University, South Africa)

Continued gender inequality and gendered representations in the media, broadly construed, remain of concern because of the dialectic relationship between language and society. One source of gender cues is fiction written for and consumed by children. The characters encountered in the pages of a popular book constitute the stuff of identity building and may become role models for thousands of young and impressionable readers. Dialogue is "particularly important in fiction" (Sunderland 2011: 68) for the development of these characters, and may be even more so, and more common, in children's fiction than in that for adults (Hunt 1991). How fictional characters' utterances are described reveals authors' assumptions about the ways in which females and males should or do speak in real life. The fact that reading acts as a source of socialisation for child readers means that patterns in the representation of male and female characters and the way they speak in children's fiction can have significant consequences. This paper explores the expression of gender in verbs of speech (such as yell, shout, giggle or cry) in selected children's fiction, focussing on a range of commercially successful series published in English in the last 70 years. The books are analysed using a blend of Corpus Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis.

The corpus consists of texts from a range of fictional series for children, including Enid Blyton's Famous Five (published from 1942 to 1963), The Chronicles of Narnia by C.S. Lewis (1950 – 1956), Francine Pascal's Sweet Valley series (1984-1998) and J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter books (2001 to 2011). For both the Narnia and Potter series, the first, last and middle books in each series were chosen as these were the texts in which all the central child characters appeared prominently in the plot. One book from each of the Sweet Valley series (Sweet Valley Twins, SV High etc.) was chosen randomly for analysis. Each series was analysed separately to identify its unique patterns and then combined to form a corpus of nearly three million words which was analysed for general tendencies.

I used a variety of corpus software to identify trends in the representation of vocalisation in terms of the gender of the human characters in the stories. A basic frequency list allowed me to identify and rank the verbs, while ProtAnt 1.2.0 and AntConc's 3.4.3 Concordance Plot revealed idiosyncratic frequency of usage in particular books. Sorting concordance lines enabled me to identify and quantify which verbs were typically attributed to female characters, and which to males, by grouping together tokens patterning with gendered pronouns, and character names. Sketch Engine provided Word Sketches which reveal the verbal behaviour of particular characters.

Motschenbacher (2009: 3) explores how nouns may be gendered in various ways, categorising these as Lexical Gender, Social Gender and Referential Gender, with a particular emphasis on body parts. Lexical Gender refers to personal nouns which are marked semantically as [male] or [female], such as uncle, grandmother, ovary; Social Gender encompasses "entrenched social stereotypes that tie certain role scripts to women and men" (op cit.: 4), such as eyelash or muscle, which,

despite not being physically restricted to one sex or the other, in practice tend to be associated with either the female or the male body, and Referential Gender is determined by the sex of the person who is being referred to. One could refer to a beard or muscles that belong to a woman, just as one could refer to these physical features on a man's body; indeed this kind of gender could be used subversively to counter the expected references, as Motschenbacher points out, such as the use of sister amongst gay men. This raises the question of whether these types of gender, and especially social gender, which highlights entrenched social stereotypes which tend to be associated with either females or males, are found in the use of verbs as well. This paper begins to answer that question by exploring the gendering of verbs of speech, or reporting verbs, as used in fiction, and in children's fiction in particular.

The results indicate clear polarisation between male and female characters, even in the more modern series of books. The similarities between the sub-corpora typically group in terms of the target audience, with the books for older readers or those written for the American market being quantitatively different, and therefore, I argue, supporting different worldviews, from the works for younger children by British authors, for instance. The SV books, for example, were generally more sexualised than the rest of the corpus, particularly the SV High and SV University titles. However, the relatively recent Harry Potter books are anachronistic both in terms of the fictional world they reflect (which is missing many modern features of the current real world, such as computers or mobile phones, while being replete with gargoyles and steam trains) and with respect to the traditional roles inhabited by female characters.

In terms of Caldas-Coulthard's (1994) taxonomy of verbs of speech, metapositional verbs (which could be considered speech acts, e.g. explain, agree, grumble, complain) and descriptive verbs (which include prosodic or paralinguistic information about the vocalisation, e.g. cry, shout, whisper, sigh) are the most frequent. The metapositional verbs frequently invoke power, or power relations, while the descriptive verbs tend to reflect emotion. In the corpus they both show strong gendered trends. For example, boasted, guffawed and bellowed are almost exclusively used by male characters, and giggled and chattered by females.

Amongst the other reporting verbs, there is also clear clustering into gendered discourse prosodies, such as the following:

+ volume	
Male characters	Female characters
bellow	screched
roar	screamed
exploded	shrieked

In addition, pairs of speech acts are polarised in terms of gender, such as *begged* (68% female) versus *ordered* (77% male). Overall, the verbs linked to male characters are associated with loudness and power, while the 'feminine' verbs tend to feature trivial emotions or weakness, and high pitch. This shows clear gendering in terms of social meanings and expressive value, with the 'masculine' verbs being linked to positively valued notions of strength and those used by female characters seen as less important and weaker.

The current research does not distinguish between simple speaker attribution and more complex structures such as suspended quotations (Mahlberg, Smith and Preston, 2013), which are frequently associated with descriptions of the body (ibid.). In Hunt (2011), I analysed the gendered uses of body parts in children's fiction, and looking specifically at suspended quotations would be a fruitful blend of these two projects.

The children's literature in English represented in this corpus reflects 'traditional' views of gender-appropriate ways of speaking, and reinforces them, supporting rather than contesting traditional gender roles. In the ideological context of the Western society in which the books were published, it is problematic that child readers are exposed to such polarised gender roles, which are rendered commonsensical by their reiteration in the stories. Harnessing the tools of corpus linguistics to analyse the books reveals the ideological discourses supported by the patterns of representation, in this case the gendered nature of reporting verbs, and allows for contestation and resistance by both the adults and children who read them.

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