



Paulina Łangowska

Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz, Poland

e-mail: p.langowska@ukw.edu.pl

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5177-7659>

## **Media Representations of Speech Disorders in Characters from Selected Animated Films for Children**

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### **Abstract**

Research so far shows that animated films are present in children's lives from an early age. Young audiences are looking for role models, which often take the form of characters from animated films. The aim of the research presented in this article was to reconstruct media representations of speech disorders specific to characters in selected animated films aimed at children. The author used archive searching as a data collection method and content analysis as a method to analyse the collected material. The paper presents results of a speech disorder analysis of 18 characters from eight animated films for children. Research shows that the most common speech disorder in animated films is lisping, followed by rhotacism and pararhotacism; there is also a relationship between animated characters' speech disorders and their character traits.

**Keywords:** media education, animated films, language, media representations, speech disorders.

## Introduction

In highly-developed countries, the modern children are surrounded by media from the very beginning their life (Morbitzer, 2017). Today, mass media are almost an integral part of the life of children, even though they are not mature enough to use modern technologies. The child's mind absorbs all information from outside, often being unable to separate fiction from reality. This results in the perpetuation of abnormal patterns of behaviour or communication (Korzeniowska, 2016).

Media of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have a very strong impact on the biological-physical, emotional and cognitive spheres, but also on the very behaviour of the youngest (Sak, 2016, p. 185). Glass screens (such as computer screens, television screens, etc) cause disturbances in the child's cognitive and linguistic development, in the child's interactions with others, but 'above all, it poses a risk to normal development, including [their] speech development' (Izdebska, 2001, p. 220). This fact is raised by the neurobiologists who claim that 'the generation of children born in the high-technology era shape their relationships with the world, people and language differently' (Cieszyńska, 2020, p. 2). In the 1990s, it was reported that Polish children spent between two and three thousand hours a year in front of a glass screen. In contrast, younger school children (8–12 years old) on average spend between two and five hours each day watching television (Izdebska, 2000). Glass screens stimulate the work of the right hemisphere of the brain (dynamic images, music, non-verbal sounds). Consequently, there may be a problem with speech development when there is a blockage in the activity of the left hemisphere of the brain, where the speech centres are formed (Cieszyńska & Korendo, 2007).

Research by the American Paediatric Association (AAP) showed that too many hours spent in front of a screen has precise consequences, resulting in, among other things, reduced interpersonal interaction (AAP, 2021). Results from US studies show that children who have used the Baby-TV channel programmes or DVDs for infants have delayed speech development (Spitzer, 2013, p. 127), and that the negative effect of media on children's language development is stronger than the positive effect of reading books to children (Spitzer, 2013, p. 128).

Electronic media also contribute to the child's delayed speech development (DSD). The research by AAP shows that the more a child watches TV, the more they are at risk for DSD [Perhaps write in full what this stands for before using initials – or place in parentheses here????]. Children who started watching TV before 12 months of age and/or watched TV for more than two hours a day were six times more likely to have DSD than children who started watching TV after 12 months of age and/or watched TV for less than two hours a day (AAP, 2021).

Children imitate many of the things they have memorised in a particular film, including speech. They also very often imitate their favourite characters from animated films. According to the linguist Aleksander Wilkoń (2000, p. 106), on the basis of the typology of linguistic varieties of contemporary Polish, the language of characters from animated films can be regarded as 'a combination of artistic written language and colloquial spoken language' (Samborska, 1999, p. 728).

It would seem that a pre-prepared and elaborated text for characters from the glass screen should be delivered correctly, should not deviate from the national linguistic norm and should serve as a model for the youngest viewers (Samborska, 1999). The language of characters from animated films represents a domination of short, single sentences over multiple complex sentences (Łobos, 2003). The characters' expressions 'repeatedly contain Anglicisms, colloquialisms and ordinary words' (Łobos, 2003, pp. 129–130). Iwona Samborska (1999), who analysed the texts of animated films for children, points out that the most prominent features of the language can include: very rapid utterance of the characters' dialogues in a raised voice (often spoken in a squeaky and shrieky manner), and an inaccurate approach to the norms of correctness, with free and natural pronunciation (Samborska, 1999, p. 730). In the animated films for children, faulty pronunciation can be heard from dubbing persons who, imitating children's language behaviour, use the 'speech to children' (Kita, 1993). 'Speech to children' is understood as having a: 'squawking voice, very thin, speaking through the nose, stuttering, prolonged articulation of voices, multiple paralinguistic elements. [...] These phenomena are sometimes combined with additional vocal articulation, mainly labialisation, dentalisation and slight palatalisation' (Kita, 1993,

p. 106). The specific language of the so-called baby talk inspired a wider research project.

The specificity of communication through mass media can be defined by an important phenomenon of audiovisuality. Animated film is a specific example of audiovisual communication, as it is not based on a technique of recording elements of reality, but on the creation of both image and sound (Sitkiewicz, 2009). The nature of the animated image makes it easier to model the depicted reality according to the will of the creator, and the ease of arousing the imagination and evoking emotions predestine animation for messages of a persuasive nature (Sitkiewicz, 2009, p. 51). The audiovisual message is characterised by the fact that the linguistic layer is coupled with the visual layer in such a way that they form a common meaningful whole (Puchała, 2016, p. 214).

The conceptual category of 'media representations' provides the theoretical context for the research undertaken. When analysing the relationship of the child audience with the media, I refer to Małgorzata Lisowska-Magdziarz's (2006) theoretical concept of 'media representations.' Media representations are part of the meaning of the broader phenomenon of the circulation of social representations (Lisowska-Magdziarz, 2014, p. 41); as understood by Moscovici (2000): it is the collective construction by a group of a developed definition of a social object for the purposes of action and communication. Media representations take place by anchoring themselves to familiar, assimilated interpretative frameworks and representations; in the long term, they lead to the production of a representation of a phenomenon or event that is objectified, taken for granted, 'true' and in conformity with 'common sense.' Such objectified representation is filled with images, metaphors or symbols that 'become permanently attached to it in the social perception' (Lisowska-Magdziarz, 2014, p. 57). Media representations lead to the emergence of a new social representation of speech disorders occurring in the characters of selected animated films for children. I assume that the child audience is influenced by those representations that are most frequent and typical. What is important is the multi-modal message of contemporary media, which repetitively, consistently and coherently builds up the image of the characters of selected animated films for children (Lisowska-Magdziarz, 2009, p. 186). The study of media representations represents social relevance,

as mass media are one of the main sources of information about the surrounding reality for modern humans, and the image of the world created by them is a reflection and source of cultural and social change. In turn, I also use Albert Bandura's social learning theory to indicate the importance of the behaviour of characters taken from animated films. The fact that people are influenced by watching animated films was demonstrated by Bandura's classic experimental research on the modelling of aggression (Bandura, 1973). People learn behaviour mostly by modelling, which means that they learn how they should behave by observing other people (Bandura, 2007, p. 37).

This article presents the results of an analysis of the disorders of characters from children's animated films. Nineteen characters and their speech disorders from eight animated films were characterised. The animated films analysed are American (United States) productions made between 1929 and 2014. It is worth noting that both in the original (where the characters speak English) and in the version dubbed into Polish, the characters have speech disorders.

## **Methodological basis for the research**

The subject of my own research was the media representations of speech disorders occurring in characters from selected animated films for children. The aim of the theoretical (exploratory) research was to reconstruct the media representations of speech disorders, characteristic of the characters in selected animated films aimed at children. The starting point for the research undertaken was the main research problem: What media representations of speech disorders occur in the animated films analysed? I formulated the specific issues as follows:

1. What is the manner of speech of the characters in selected animated films for children?
2. What speech disorders are most common in the case of characters present in the animated films under study?
3. What character traits distinguish the characters of animated films with speech disorders?

In my work, having decided on the qualitative research strategy, I used archive searching as a data collection method and content analysis as a meth-

od of analysing the collected material (Konarzewski, 2000; Rubacha, 2008). I purposively selected for the study animated films that met the following criteria:

- a) animation technique: digital animation – stop-motion animation and 3D animation,
- b) audience of the films: pre-school and school children,
- c) the case of speech disorder represented by at least one character was a prerequisite; in most of the animated films studied, one of the characters has a characteristic speech disorder, which is an attribute of the character recognisable to the child; in the animated film Looney Tunes as many as nine characters have a speech disorder,
- d) duration of the film – this attribute was assessed as secondary because considering only short films (e.g. one episode of Looney Tunes lasts 7 minutes) would exclude longer cinema films (Minions – 90 minutes) featuring distinctive characters with pronounced speech disorders,
- e) country of production – although this attribute was assessed as secondary, the studied group included only films of American production (from studios originating from the United States) with Polish dubbing. One Polish production called *Miscellaneous Adventures of Balbinka The Goose* by the Animated Film Studio in Bielsko Biała from 1959 features the character of *Ptyś* with the speech disorder known as parasigmatism (changing the sounds: s, z, c, dz into: sz, ź, cz, dź), but the number of surviving episodes is insufficient to qualify for the study group. In Table 1 I have summarised the animated films that were analysed.

Table 1. Characteristics of the animated films analysed

Title	Produced by	Country of production	Year of production	Length of episode	Number of characters with speech disorders
Looney Tunes	Warner Bros	United States	from 1929	7 minutes	9
Winnie the Pooh	Walt Disney		from 1966	25 minutes	2
Donald Duck	Walt Disney		from 1934	8 minutes	1
The Smurfs	Columbia Pictures		from 1981	22 minutes	1
Disney's Adventures of the Gummi Bears,	Walt Disney		from 1985	11 or 22 minutes	1
Minions	Illumination		from 2010	94 minutes	2
Ice Age	20 <sup>th</sup> Century Fox		from 2002	81 minutes	1
Clarence	Cartoon Network Studios	from 2014	11 minutes	1	

Source: Own elaboration.

## Results

In the animated films under study, it is possible to distinguish between the various speech disorders manifested by the characters (Table 2). The most common speech disorder in animated films is lisping. Among the 18 characters analysed, lisping is present in the case of 7 characters. The second place in terms of numbers is occupied by disorders associated with abnormal articulation of the vowel [r], namely rhotacism and pararhotacism. In total, these speech disorders occurred in the case of 4 characters.

Table 2. Juxtaposition of animated film characters with their speech disorders

Pos.	Title of the animated film	Character	Exemplary utterance	Speech disorder
1.	Looney Tunes	Sylvester the Cat	“Witaj, mój pierzasty przyjacielu!” (Eng. <i>Hello, my fine-feathered friend!</i> )	interdental lateral lispings, salivation
2.	Looney Tunes	Tweety Bird	“Zdawało mi się, że widziałem kotecka. Dobrze mi się zdawało. Widziałem kotecka” (Eng. <i>I tawt I taw a Puddy Tat. I did! I did! I did taw a Puddy Tat</i> )	parasigmatism, rhotacism
3.	Looney Tunes	Daffy Duck	“Jessteś podły!” (Eng. <i>You’re mean!</i> )	lateral lispings
4.	Looney Tunes	Elmer Fudd	“Od dziś intesuje mnie wyłącznie łowienie tybek. I żadnych więcej kłólików!” (Eng. <i>Be vewy vewy quiet, I’m hunting wabbits!</i> )	pararhotacism
5.	Looney Tunes	Foghorn Leghorn	“Uważaj, mały!” (Eng. <i>Pay attention, son!</i> )	interdental lispings
6.	Looney Tunes	Bugs Bunny	“Co jest, doktoru?” (Eng. <i>What’s up, doc?</i> )	closed hypernasal speech
7.	Looney Tunes	Yosemite Sam	“Jestem najpodlejszym, najszorstszym, najtwardszym hombre, jaki kiedykolwiek przepłynął Rio Grande – i nie jestem idiotą!” (Eng. <i>I’m the meanest, roughest, toughest hombre that’s ever crossed the Rio Grande - and I ain’t no namby-bamby!</i> )	hoarseness
8.	Looney Tunes	Porky Pig	“ I to-i to-i to by było na tyle!” (Eng. <i>Th-th-That’s all, Folks!</i> )	stuttering
9.	Looney Tunes	Wile E. Coyote	communicates only by means of <i>placards</i>	mutism
10.	Winnie the Pooh	Tigger	<i>Cześć! Jestem Tygrys! T-Y-G-R-Y-S.</i> (Eng. <i>Hello! I’m Tiger! T-I-G-E-R</i> )	interdental lispings
11.	Winnie the Pooh	Piglet	“Y-y-y-y” (Eng. <i>Y-y-y-y</i> )	stuttering



Table 2. (continued)

Pos.	Title of the animated film	Character	Exemplary utterance	Speech disorder
12.	Donald Duck	Donald Duck	"Ojej, Phooney!" (Eng. <i>Oh, Phoey</i> )	lateral lispings, sibilance, wheezing, salivation
13.	The Smurfs	Brainy Smurf	"Będziemy walczyć do ostatniego smerfa!" (Eng. <i>He who smurfs last!</i> )	closed hypernasal speech
14.	Disney's Adventures of the Gummi Bears,	Gruffi Gummi	"Ludzie oznaczają kłopoty". (Eng. <i>People mean trouble</i> )	parasigmatism
15.	Minions	Gru	"Dorobić się na kradzieży księżycy i zaistnieć". (Eng. <i>Make money by stealing the moon and make a name for yourself</i> )	rhotacism
16.	Minions	Dru	"Jak tam rozwija się twoja kariera?" (Eng. <i>How is your career progressing there?</i> )	rhotacism
17.	Ice Age	Sid	"A co to? Sysuuunia!" (Eng. <i>About? Sysuuuuuu!</i> )	lateral lispings
18.	Clarence	Clarence Wendle	"To dla ciebie" (ang. <i>It's for you</i> )	lispings, salivation

Source: Own elaboration.

Speech disorders in children's animated films can be linked to specific character traits (Table 3). For example, in many utterances of lispings characters, one gets the impression that their speech disorder is an expression of the sloppiness of the characters' speech. In the common social perception, stuttering is attributed to shy and distant people. Animated films do not break this stereotype; on the contrary, they consolidate it. It seems significant that both Porky from Looney Tunes and Piglet from Winnie the Pooh are pigs, i.e. animals that are portrayed pejoratively in animated films. This juxtaposition can create a sense of embarrassment in a child struggling with a speech-language impairment.

Table 3. Character traits of animated film characters and their speech disorders

Speech disorder	stuttering	lisping and parasigmatism	rhotacism and pararhotacism	hypernasal speech
Animated film character	Porky Pig	Tweety Bird	Elmer Fudd	Bugs Bunny
	Piglet	Clarence	Gru, Dru	Brainy Smurf
Character type	little piggy	child type	hunter or villain	leader
Character nature	shy	childish	leadership	self-confidence
	distant	infantile	inept	individualism

Source: Own elaboration.

Tweety Bird is a child type of character. The utterances of the little bird, who cannot say the words correctly, arouse laughter among the adult audience, while they can become role models for the youngest. Due to the occurrence of parasigmatism, the infantile speech and manner of expression, as well as the childlike manner of speaking, Tweety is perceived as a warm and charming character. In contrast, Sylvester the Cat’s unsuccessful attempts to hunt Tweety Bird provide an element of situational comedy, which, with the cat’s characteristic drool and interdental lateral lisping, make the youngest viewers of animated films laugh out loud. It can be assumed that this humour stems from the contrast between the qualities the character wants to achieve (a predator hunting a canary) and the immaturity resulting from the speech disorder as well as the inability to catch the prey.

There is a similar contrast among characters struggling with rhotacism and pararhotacism. In the case of Elmer Fudd as well as Gru and Dru, we are dealing with a type of conqueror, hunter or villain who does not inspire fear among the audiences, due to the ineptitude of his actions, which is also highlighted by his characteristic speech impediment.

The conclusion can be drawn that the hypernasal speech of Brainy Smurf, similar to the case of Bugs Bunny, is intended to attract the attention of the recipient of the message. The protagonists are confident leaders and their mannerisms (an abnormal nasal resonance) are supposed to make them unique; in reality, they are sometimes perceived as irritating characters.

Speech disorders are often a recognisable attribute of an animated film character's speech, which makes them distinctive. In the animated films analysed, there is a clear regularity linking a speech defect to the character traits. Distant and shy characters often stutter, confident characters are attributed hypernasal speech, inept villains represent rhotacism, while childish characters lisp.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

Contemporary reality leads us to reflect that animated films are present in the children's life from an early age and are the most common form of entertainment for children (Juszczuk, 2011). Animated films watched on the glass screen attract children's attention not only because of their colourful images and vivid storyline, but also because of the interesting characters. The characters in animated films for children provide models for verbal and non-verbal experiences (Korzeniowska, 2019). When observing pre-school and school-age children, we can see that during everyday chores or play, young viewers often enact characters they know from the screen (Drzewiecki, 2010). They imitate various protagonists, display their behaviour or use the characteristic phrases of a given character (Bandura, 2007).

The world of animated films with characters who represent some speech disorders can obviously lead to imitation of the abnormal pattern or additional difficulties in speech therapy. In contrast, older children may identify with characters who have the same speech disorder. Children's imitation of faulty speech, often abnormal behaviour, but also less frequent conversations between parents and children about animated film characters and allowing children to watch them for longer periods of time, can consequently lead to the perpetuation of abnormalities among the young audience (Kosicka, 2018). School-age peers may stigmatise a child diagnosed with a speech disorder by making fun of them and comparing their speech to a character such as Donald Duck.

One would have to consider the point of endowing animated film characters with speech and language disorders in terms of articulation, voice, speech fluency, and language communication. Animation characters with speech defects can, for example, teach tolerance and often elicit laughter (as

in the case of Tweety Bird's pronunciation), but they are also the source of the defective communication pattern they transmit to children.

A child's speech style depends on the quality of communication, and the quality of speech depends on personality and general intellectual development (Kowalik-Paluch, 2019). In addition to the fact that children memorise the speech of characters, this speech often also contains grammatical simplifications. The young recipient learns new words, but still cannot construct a correct utterance with them. Another disadvantageous feature of the language is that very often the voice is shrieky or squeaky (Samborska, 1999). Another important issue also becomes the correctness of the word forms used in animated films and their correct pronunciation or accentuation, which unfortunately becomes imitated by young viewers.

The results of my research indicated that the most common speech disorder in animated films is lisp-ing, followed by rhotacism and pararhotacism. There is a correlation between the speech disorders of animated film characters and their traits of character. Stuttering is attributed to shy and distant characters, while hypernasal speech is attributed to confident leaders. Lisp-ing is a common attribute of characters who are infantile or characterised by sloppy utterances. Characters of inept villains, hunters or conquerors, often struggle with rhotacism.

Many animated film characters become evergreen pop culture icons, but their behaviour or way of communicating is not always a role model. Let us quote one example: a character from Looney Tunes, the skunk *Pepé Le Pew*. Skunk *Pepé* is a stereotypical French romantic guy: he pronounces the French 'r' and uses French loanwords as interjections. In addition, he is a womaniser and a seducer. In many episodes of Looney Tunes, he hugs and kisses a she-cat he meets against her will and locks the door to prevent her from escaping him. The character appears in the 1996 iconic family film *Space Jam*. However, the skunk does not appear in the animated sequel of 2021, as the filmmakers purposely removed from the film a scene featuring him. In a column written for *The New York Times*, Charles M. Blow describes the skunk's behaviour as part of a 'rape culture' (Blow, 2021), which can have no place in animated films for children. In the animated film about *Speedy Gonzales* (a fast-talking Mexican mouse characterised by very rapid speech and the repetition of Spanish phrases), the same author also recognises the damaging

stereotype of Mexicans portrayed as lethargic, lazy and alcohol-influenced rodents who, in the original version, speak a very clumsy English.

Animated films for children can therefore perpetuate cultural stereotypes, including those related to language. Children's perceptions of animated characters communicating in a non-normative way are marked by stereotypes built on social messages and conventions.

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