

Lead Women: An Examination of Traditional Gender Roles in *Frozen*

Introduction

Disney has a large audience to cater to, inside the United States as well as globally. I wanted to see if popular notions of how women behave linguistically have shifted since their early movies were made. There has been a surge in feminism in recent years, and women in America are largely much more independent now than they were in the 1900s. When early Disney movies were created, very few women were in positions of power. In fact, women were encouraged not to take jobs outside of “nurturing” fields such as teaching, nursing, or caregiving. In media, women were not often shown as main characters, and when they were, they often were portrayed as passive or subservient to their male family members. While reflecting on this, I hypothesized that modern Disney films would reflect the cultural shift that has been occurring and decided to inspect how the two lead princesses, Anna and Elsa, in *Frozen* (2013) conform or push against gender stereotypes. Recently, there has been a lot of public discussion on modern Disney movies, with some people arguing that the older films portrayed women as helpless and incapable without the help of a man. Elsa is one of the only princesses that doesn’t end up with a man romantically at the end of the movie, so I was interested to see if that notion associated with the 1950s has become obsolete, or if it was prevalent in aspects of the 2013 film. After rewatching the movie, I found that Elsa’s speech is more stereotypically masculine, while Anna is introduced to us as a highly feminine character. What was really compelling to me was how Anna developed over the course of the film. At the beginning, she uses many features of what Robin Lakoff defines as “Women’s Language”. Although while growing up, girls are expected not to speak “roughly” or be competitive, they are also ridiculed for using features of women’s language, as it is taken less seriously, especially in professional settings. As she develops, Anna

uses women's language less and becomes more competitive with those around her, such as Elsa, Kristoff, and Hans. The filmmakers showcased Anna's growing trust in herself through the notable shift in the way she communicates. Through Anna and Elsa, *Frozen* demonstrates that women can use both male and female styles of interaction and aren't simply confined to stereotypes. In this paper, I will first discuss the data and methodology. I will then analyze my data and explain the relevance to my thesis, before ending my paper with a conclusion.

Data and Methodology

I rewatched the movie *Frozen* (2013) and recorded 10 minutes worth of conversation, with 4 main speakers throughout various scenes. These included Anna, Elsa, Hans, and Kristoff. There were a few less significant people in scenes that were mentioned in my transcript, but they were not vital to understanding interpersonal dynamics of the sisters. Since the movie is publicly available on streaming platforms, I didn't have to worry about obtaining consent from the speakers. I utilized my transcriptions to analyze Anna and Elsa's interactions linguistically, looking for any usage of women's language. I selected key moments from the film that support my conclusion that the film pushes against the stereotype of highly feminine princesses, while also showing that women can become strong characters through gaining independence. The most relevant lines are included in my paper, but I found that there were many scenes that supported my argument.

Data Analysis

In the 2013 film, *Frozen*, Princesses Anna and Elsa grow up in the same house but become isolated from each other when Elsa conceals her powers, shutting herself off from everyone, including her sister Anna. Anna grows up without much contact with the outside

world. The palace gates are always closed, so after her parents die in a boat accident, she spends most of her time alone. At the beginning of the film, Anna primarily uses women's language. Notable features Anna uses include hedging, question intonation, hypercorrection, and rapport talk. Anna second guesses herself a lot, while her sister Elsa is more direct and firmer while speaking. Elsa is cold, and doesn't feel the need to explain herself, while Anna comes off as a people pleaser. This is demonstrated in line 95 when despite being confident, Anna answers The Duke of Weselton's question with HRT rather than a declaration.

92 Duke: ## Speaking of (.) so great to have the gates open.

93 Duke: Why did they shut them in the first place?

94 Duke: Do you know the reason (.) h:mm?

95 Anna: No?

The interaction above demonstrates question intonation, which is often associated with women who cannot assert themselves. Another feature that makes her come off unassuming is hypercorrect grammar, which Anna also exhibits while speaking. The morning of Elsa's coronation, she fantasizes about meeting a man and falling love. Caught up in her excitement, Anna came off as vulnerable, and Hans took advantage of that. In lines 28-31, when she first meets Prince Hans, she seems overly eager to please him.

28 Anna: @

29 Anna: This is awkward. @

30 Anna: Not you're awkward, but just because we're- I'm- awkward.

31 Anna: You're gorgeous. (.) Wait what?

The scenes that follow it portray Anna as someone who isn't thinking clearly, as she and Hans get engaged that same day. Hans assumed that he would get away with tricking Anna into thinking that he truly loved her and didn't take her seriously. Elsa, who uses more stereotypically

male style communication, tries to discourage Anna from rushing into anything with a stranger. Elsa's communication style and behavior allow her to be the authority, and she oftentimes shuts Anna down. While my previous examples with Anna's speech have been in male and female interactions, in lines 65 and 66, when Anna is speaking with Elsa, she still uses hypercorrection.

61 Elsa: <clears throat> Hi.

62 Anna: (.)Hi- Hi me?

63 Anna: Oh um? Hi.

64 Elsa: You look beautiful.

65 Anna: Thank you. @ YOU look beautifuller.

66 Anna: I mean not fuller. You don't look fuller? But- more- more beautiful.

At the beginning of the film, Anna expressed that she wanted to “go back to the way things were” before Elsa shut herself off from everyone, but didn't push back when Elsa told her no. Even though they are siblings, Anna doesn't really seem comfortable telling Elsa how she feels outright. Anna wants to be closer to Elsa and help her understand, but Elsa ultimately takes control of the conversation, cutting Anna off. Her short statement, “It just can't”, effectively lets Anna know that the discussion is over, without providing a further explanation as to why. Elsa comes off as dismissive, using a male style interactional pattern.

107 Anna: @@ I've never been better. This is so nice.

108 Anna: I wish it could be like this all the time.

109 Elsa: Me too (5.0) But it can't

110 Anna: Well why not? I mean we- ##

111 Elsa: It just can't.

When Anna leaves the palace to go after Elsa, she starts to use women's language less. As her independence develops, Anna becomes more confident and surer of herself, which is reflected in a shift in her language use. She argues with Kristoff, engaging in friendly

competition, which is associated with men rather than women. At one point insisting to him, “We leave now, right now”, after he said they would leave the next day at dawn.

114 Kristoff: <bag thuds> Oof.

115 Anna: Sorry. Sorry I’m sorry I didn’t- <clears throat> We leave now. Right now.

Anna also contests Kristoff’s knowledge of her engagement, telling him that she’s doubtful he knows love experts. Rather than accepting that Kristoff thought her engagement was a bad idea, she argues for her opinion. This is a stark contrast from her previous interactions with men, especially those with Hans.

Anna: Look it doesn’t mat:ter.

135 Anna: It’s true love.

136 Kristoff: Doesn’t sound like true love.

137 Anna: <scoffs> Are you some sort of love expert?

138 Kristoff: No (.) <scoffs>

139 Kristoff: But I have friends who are.

140 Anna: You have friends who are love experts? (.) I’m not buying it.

When she is trying to find Elsa, Anna develops her strengths and pushes back against others when she has something to say, rather than giving up. Throughout the movie as she develops, her speech reflects her growing bravery. Anna raises her voice at the end of her sentence, emphasizing that she isn’t afraid of Elsa, and can defend herself without help.

142 Elsa: <scoffs> No (.) we can’t.

143 Elsa: Goodbye Anna.

144 Anna: Elsa wait.

145 Elsa: No. I’m just trying to protect you.

146 Anna: You don’t have to protect me I’m not AFRAID.

At the end of the film, Anna saves Elsa from being killed by Hans, risking her own life in the process. Her development as a character is not only showcased through her independence, but also her verbal interactions with others. The filmmakers were able to advocate for women's capabilities by demonstrating Anna's growth. She went from someone who was afraid and lonely to someone who took control of her own future and saved her kingdom from being taken over. Elsa on the other hand, was relatively static as a character, but was able to let loose a bit at the end of the film, showcasing her vulnerability. She grew comfortable with her powers and was more authentic with Anna, which helped her in her role as queen.

Discussion and Conclusion

Frozen's two leads, Anna and Elsa, demonstrate changing notions of how princesses are portrayed in Disney movies. Through the examples I analyzed, I proved that they were more complex characters, shifting their language use throughout the film. Particularly, Anna's character development is shown linguistically thorough her becoming more assertive and competitive. At the beginning of the story, Anna was very complicit and often used features of women's language. However, while she remained true to herself, Anna was able to expand her ability to better advocate for her needs and the needs of her family. This film pushes back against stereotypes of the earlier Disney princess films, showing that women can become independent, be leaders, and defend themselves when they are being threatened. Women can be feminine and yet still be powerful, using stereotypical "men's language" when they need to. This is proven through Elsa's masculine forms of speaking, and Anna's shift away from hedging, question intonation, hypercorrection, and rapport talk.

Works Cited

Frozen. Directed by Chris Buck and Jennifer Lee, Walt Disney Pictures, 2013.

Lakoff, Robin Tolmach. *Language and Woman's Place*. Octagon Press, Limited, 1976.