

# Parents, Power, and Impoliteness

A Linguistic Analysis of the  
Increasing Impoliteness in  
Disney Animated Films

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*Interactions between leading characters of Disney animated films demonstrate a shocking increase in impoliteness over the last several decades, yet little research has been conducted regarding this trend. This article explores linguistic impoliteness in parent-child interactions in Disney films and argues that this increasing impoliteness affects child social development. This will be accomplished by defining positive and negative impoliteness, discussing the effects of media on children, and examining the use of impoliteness in selected Disney films. Data for this study was gathered from The Little Mermaid (1989) and Brave (2013) and shows that Brave exhibits nearly six times more impoliteness events.*

## Introduction

Disney is generally accepted as one of the biggest brands in children's and family-friendly entertainment worldwide. Despite this family-oriented image, many of its titular and starring characters have increased the use of linguistic impoliteness in their dialogue. As modern children have more interaction with media and film and spend less time with their parents than in previous generations, they model their own interactions after social interactions in film (Binkley, 2016; Benabdellah, 2018). The more impoliteness children see in media, the more impolite they will become, reflecting what they perceive to be the societal norm (Binkley, 2016).

Until recently, these interactions have not been heavily scrutinized, and what little research has been done has focused on the impoliteness of modern Disney characters—especially across gender lines—but has not compared new films to older classics or studied the increase of impoliteness over time (Benabdellah, 2018). This study shows increased impoliteness to be particularly noticeable between parents and children in Disney animated films. Those who make films and those who choose to show them to their children should consider the effects of media consumption on children (Binkley, 2016).

This article will explore the use of positive and negative impoliteness in parent-child interactions as demonstrated by family-oriented Disney animated films. To this end, this article will first establish the linguistic context of impoliteness by defining positive and negative face, politeness, and impoliteness. Second, this article will review power, authority, and parent-child interactions in the context of children's psychology. It will then look at why films should even be discussed in this context and the effect of film on culture and psychology. Next, this article will look at data collected by other researchers on impoliteness in Disney films. And finally, it will address certain transcribed dialogues of parent-child interactions in two similar Disney animated films with over two decades between them: *The*

*Little Mermaid* (1989) and *Brave* (2012). This analysis will demonstrate the shift toward impoliteness over time.

## **Linguistic Context**

To understand impoliteness, one must first understand the concept of face. Face is the public image of a person. Positive face is a person's desire to be liked, appreciated, or understood (Haugh & Bargiela-Chiappini, 2010). As discussed by Culpeper, Bousfield, and Wichmann (2003), positive politeness is characterized by compliments, hedging, offering excuses or apologies, and other forms of building a person's positive face. They continue by writing that negative face, on the other hand, is the desire not to be imposed upon or embarrassed. Negative politeness downplays embarrassing situations, usually by ignoring them. Events that could make a person look bad and lose face are called face threatening, and any social act that makes someone look better, such as making an excuse for not going to an event, involves saving face.

Bousfield and Locher (2008) clearly connect the concepts of politeness and face with impoliteness by stating that impoliteness generally involves either attacking face or simply not saving face. There are four kinds of impoliteness: bald on-record, mock politeness (sometimes called off-record), positive, and negative. Bald on-record impoliteness is a direct, clear attack on the speaker, such as name calling. There is no intention to hide the face attack in bald on-record impoliteness. The intention of mock politeness is to seem polite while being impolite. This often takes the form of sarcasm. Positive impoliteness attacks positive face, which aims to build connections, in the form of ignoring, excluding, interrupting, or otherwise showing that a person is not worth attention. Lastly, negative impoliteness attacks negative face by imposing on someone else or calling attention to things that politeness would overlook to save negative face—for example, pointing out flaws and debts or explicitly associating the other person with something negative. Quantifying impoliteness for research data is difficult, however, since it is more qualitative in nature and must be considered with other factors. Impoliteness can be impacted by

tone, which cannot be measured quantitatively. Spencer-Oatey points out that “it is essential to hear the voice of participants” when analyzing impoliteness because intonation is crucial for understanding meaning (2011, p. 3565). He then adds that, among linguists, there is no consensus as to the best method to measure what is heard. Additionally, while some utterances are far more impolite than others, there is no scale on which to graph them.

This study will measure impoliteness by counting incidents and categorizing them into the four main types of impoliteness: positive impoliteness, negative impoliteness, bald on-record, and mock politeness. These categories are further divided into several sub-types outlined later in this article. While this study does seek to define and measure certain instances of impoliteness, it is neither a comprehensive list of every possible act of impoliteness nor a qualitative study comparing the severity of various impolite utterances.

## **Children’s Psychology**

Having built the linguistic context of impoliteness, I will now address impoliteness in examples of daily interactions and finish laying the groundwork to examine the effects of impolite media on children. I will first address how power and authority generally affect conversation and relationships. Then, I will discuss parent-child interactions, focusing on how they differ from other interactions and the role impoliteness plays in that relationship outside of a media context.

### **Power and Authority in Interactions**

Bousfield and Locher (2008) argue that impoliteness is heavily influenced by relationships of power and authority. They add that “there is and can be no interaction without power” and that “impoliteness is an exercise of power” (2008, p. 8). This power relationship can play out in various ways. Consider, for instance, the interactions of police officers with drivers and car owners. Such interactions are presented in a BBC television documentary filmed in London, which was analyzed by Culpeper, Bousfield, and Wichmann (2003). In

these situations, the officers are in a position of power over the civilians, but the civilians often initiate confrontation with the traffic wardens, leading to impoliteness. Interestingly, in these cases, it is the party with less power that exhibits more impoliteness. The authors argue this is because the goal of the officer is only “to perform actions consistent with the duties and constraints his job imposes” (2003, p. 1551).

O’Reilly (2008) uncovered a similar phenomenon in the multi-party interactions of family therapists with adult and minor clients. Although the therapists often interrupt their clients, these interruptions are not seen as face-threatening, but rather that the therapist is trying to maintain an agenda, which O’Reilly argues “reflects the power asymmetry inherent in the situation” (2008, p. 509). The therapist is there to direct the conversation as part of their role, so entering the conversation in the middle of someone else’s sentence is not seen as impolite.

If some speech acts performed in an asymmetrical power relationship are not impolite, but rather the duty of the authority figure, at what point is a parent simply doing their duty to raise a well-behaved child, and at what point does it become impolite?

### **Impoliteness in Parent–Child Interactions**

Parents are, ideally, in a position of power in the home. It is a parent’s responsibility to raise their children to adhere to societal norms, praising good behavior and reprimanding bad behavior. Culpeper, Bousfield, and Wichmann (2003) argue that there are people in positions of authority—such as bosses, tutors, teachers, police officers, or parents—that must give criticism as part of their role. Along with others in their field (e.g., Blum-Kulka, 1990; Greif, 1980; and O’Reilly, 2008), they explore the idea that in some instances, the criticism given by persons in authority is acceptable, though it may be impolite in other circumstances. This difference exists because the intention of for persons with authority is not to attack face, but instead to support the other person’s development or to keep them in the right path. This view is

echoed by Sinafou (2012), who points out that disagreement discourse may not be inherently impolite, but far more complex, requiring more context to understand.

That said, uncovering the intention behind a speech act is problematic. Culpeper, Bousfield, and Wichmann point out that “one cannot reconstruct the actual intentions of speakers, but rather that ‘plausible’ intentions can be reconstructed, given adequate evidence” (2003, p. 1552). And if the participants in studies were asked, researchers would not be able to gather accurate data because of the nature of self-reporting. Most parents would be slow to admit that any impoliteness toward their children stemmed from unkind intentions.

Additional research has further solidified the claim that familial interactions are not required to be polite. For instance, Blum-Kulka interviewed families from American, Israeli, and American Israeli backgrounds, the majority of whom voiced opinions that politeness should be exhibited with strangers and acquaintances but “is irrelevant when it comes to the family” (1990, p. 260). Despite the position of those participants, Blum-Kulka argues that “family discourse is polite, but it enacts its politeness in culturally and situationally specific ways” (1990, p. 261). That is to say, the directness and informality that characterize otherwise impolite utterances are hallmarks of the closeness found in familial relationships. Blum-Kulka (1990) points out that just as politeness varies from culture to culture, impoliteness is dramatically different from one culture to another. This distinction of cultures exists internationally but is also true of smaller units, such as states, cities, neighborhoods, and even families. What may be perceived as impolite in one culture may be perfectly acceptable in another.

Additionally, Blum-Kulka looks most closely at control acts issued by parents, which she defined as “utterances designed to bring about a change in the behavior of the [child]” (1990, p. 265). She found a wide range of directness and indirectness in the interactions between the parents and children that were observed. Culpeper, Bousfield, and Wichmann (2003) dive deeper into this by examining the use of impoliteness

by an adult toward a child in an emergency. In the examined scenario, the man speaking knows there is a bomb and is trying to coax his young nephew out of the place where the bomb is because he believes the boy is hiding there. Although he uses harsh language to command the child to come out, the man's primary concern is ensuring his nephew's safety, which requires immediate action. In this example, impolite utterances are not only acceptable in a familial situation, but also—at least in the mind of the speaker—absolutely necessary for the health and safety of the child.

The adult in this story is not one of the child's parents, which suggests that adults have social power over children in general, even outside of traditional familial boundaries. This phenomenon is further shown in O'Reilly's (2008) study, which finds that therapists interrupt children and adults differently and argues that this happens because children are not seen as full participants in conversations. The data presented by O'Reilly shows that adults sometimes discourage children from being full participants in the conversation "by taking the conversational floor from them" (2008, p. 509). Parents are not the only adults who interrupt their children, who are generally excluded from the conversation entirely.

This supports Greif's findings that "in our society, children are usually taught not to interrupt a person who is talking. Yet many adults themselves interrupt others" (1980, p. 253). The standard that adults enforce with their children is not one they tend to follow themselves, particularly when addressing children, but as discussed in the next section, children do not always do what they are told to, instead emulating the behaviors they observe from role models.

## **Children and Disney**

As access to the silver screen has become ever more abundant, and on-demand streaming services have slowly replaced traditional television, the film industry has become a growing source of social education for children. As they observe interactions depicted in television, film, and other media, they take

mental note of the interpersonal communications they see in a wide variety of settings and emulate this behavior in their own lives (Binkley, 2016).

## **Disney and Culture**

Binkley (2016) points out that children's development is heavily influenced by their perception of the world around them. The input children receive can shift their development and influence the identity they create for themselves. To this end, Benabdellah (2018) identifies the main characters of Disney films as role models for children; they teach them how to interact with other people and promote societal norms. This can be good or bad. For example, where one child may see a charismatic character who overcomes incredible odds to defeat the obstacles before them, another may see breaking the law as acceptable if one really needs or wants to break it. Both of these lessons could be gleaned from a film like *Aladdin* (1992), which Binkley (2016) points to as a promoter of cultural stereotypes and historical inaccuracies.

Binkley (2016) further shows that media consumption has been linked to a flurry of issues, such as "obesity, eating disorders, advanced sexual displays, violence, family stress, and an incapacitated ability to create" (2016, p. 13). This can be seen in various forms, such as trying to climb out the bedroom window after watching a character sneak out on television or hitting their sibling after seeing a boxing match. Binkley also argues that Disney films perpetuate beauty standards, gender roles, racial questions, stereotypes, and misrepresentations that may be unhealthy, claiming that "children mindlessly adopt these cultural values and relay them into their relationships, their learning, and their identity as a whole" (2016, p. 15). For example, a child may observe that the protagonists in their show are all beautiful, fit, and charismatic, while the villains are quiet and ugly, leading them to believe that their value is derived from their physique or social aptitude. All of this occurs because children emulate the examples they see in the media they consume.

Because children absorb the tendencies and interactions they observe in real life and in media, it is critical that the



interactions we raise them with—whether real or fictional—are the kinds of interactions we want to see from them. For this reason, this study seeks to gauge the impoliteness in a few Disney films and call attention to trends found there.

### **Literature Review on Impoliteness in Disney Films**

Benabdellah (2018) transcribed interactions between the flag ship princesses and their male costars in *Frozen* (2013) and *Moana* (2016), two of the highest-grossing films that Walt Disney Animated Studios has ever produced. When the article was written, they were the number one and number two highest-grossing Disney princess films ever made (IMDB, 2020). Benabdellah found “that both genders perform impoliteness as a communicative speech event to convey certain feelings, emotions, and attitudes” (2018, p. 48), but in different ways. Benabdellah’s data showed that the women in Disney films used fewer impolite utterances than the men did, which is consistent with data gathered by other studies (Binkley, 2016; Greif, 1980; O’Reilly, 2008), showing that women use more politeness markers than men, and men use more impoliteness markers than women. Interestingly, the men in Benabdellah’s (2018) study used primarily dominance- and competition-oriented speech patterns, often dismissing the female protagonist and demanding obedience, whereas the women used more criticism, disapproval, and power challenges. For example, Kristoff’s line, “Now, back up while I deal with this crook, here!” is a dismissal of Anna’s previous statement, which had been a show of power. On the other hand, Anna’s line, “Are you some sort of love expert?” acts as a challenging question to counteract his disagreement with her choices (Benabdellah 2018). But what does this mean for the next generation?

Binkley (2016, p. 17) declares, “Disney is a subliminal educator and displays cultural messages that teach children how to function in society, how they should look, how they should act, and ultimately, how they should develop.” Children actively observe the world around them to better understand what is “normal.” When they see heroes and heroines from their

favorite media acting a certain way, they mirror what they see, wanting to be heroes and heroines themselves. Thus, to understand what the modern child hopes to become, we need only examine the animated idols they love.

Further exploration of this point led Binkley (2016) to find that during the middle school years, racism and gender roles enter the Disney discussions, with students claiming that *The Princess and the Frog* “was only made to feature a black princess” and that for girls “to be worthy of anything they have to endure a struggle . . . before realizing her true value. Finally, at the end of that road, the reward of true love, getting married as a teenager, and happily ever after awaits them” (2016, p. 16–17). Whether parents realize it or not, the racism and gender roles present in Disney films teach children what to expect from life, from how to behave themselves to what they should look like.

## **The Study**

To examine impoliteness in parent-child interactions in media, I analyzed parent-child conversations extracted from two Disney films: *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and *Brave* (2012). The methodology and results are laid out in this section, coupled with several examples from the interactions in these films.

## **Methodology**

The conversations in question were transcribed and then coded for impoliteness. In both films, the dialogue analyzed occurs between the lead princess and one of her parents. In *The Little Mermaid*, conversations between Ariel and her father, King Triton are analyzed. In *Brave*, the recorded conversations occur between Merida and her mother, Queen Elinor. These two films were chosen because they resemble one another in plot line and character motivation (and, less significantly, hair color). In each film, the princess desires to change the course of her life and stray from her parent’s expectations, desires, and restrictions. This leads to conflict with her parent, who in turn breaks something precious to her that the parent does not approve of her having. Then the

princess, out of spite and anger, visits a witch, who casts a spell of physical transformation, which fails to give the princess her desired outcome. Ultimately, to escape the negative consequences of the spell, the princess must gain her parent's help. In the end, the princess is reconciled with her parent, who sees how important the princess's desired path is and gives her the freedom to choose it for herself.

In both films, the princess and her parent interact almost exclusively for the first forty minutes of each film, after which the physical transformation occurs. At this time, one of the members of the highlighted parent-child relationship loses the capacity to speak for the majority of the film, specifically Ariel (*The Little Mermaid*) and Queen Elinor (*Brave*). It is worth noting that the films begin to differ after this point. King Triton and Ariel have no dialogue whatsoever after Ariel loses her ability to speak. Ariel apologizes for her decisions and later declares her love for her father, but he says nothing to her after destroying her sanctuary in the cave. Additionally, Ariel and King Triton are separated for almost the entirety of the film after that point, whereas Merida and Queen Elinor spend almost the entire film together—although the queen has been silenced—leading to only one-way conversation for nearly the remainder of the film. For this reason, only the first forty minutes of each film were transcribed and coded as part of this analysis. These decisions were made to nullify every possible difference other than impoliteness between the two films, which were chosen specifically because they are so similar.

The similarity between these stories lends itself well to comparison. A few key differences, however, greatly affect the analysis undertaken here. These differences include aspects of their family cultures, which may change what is acceptable and what is impolite within their family dynamic. First, Princess Ariel's mother is never shown in this film, while Merida has access to both of her parents. While she and her father, King Fergus, get along wonderfully, she is constantly at odds with her mother, Queen Elinor. Second, Merida is the oldest and is therefore under near-constant supervision and expected to

fulfill certain responsibilities, while her three younger brothers get away with anything they do. On the other hand, Ariel is the youngest and has been largely left on her own—likely due, in part, to the absence of her mother.

## Results

The vast majority of impoliteness in *The Little Mermaid* and about half of the impoliteness in *Brave* is positive impoliteness, the majority of which consists of either ignoring or interrupting. Examples of characters being argumentative or using obscure, secretive language are also found. This emphasizes the difficulty the princesses and their parents have with listening to each other and communicating effectively. Interestingly, very early in the film, Merida is shown reaching out to her mother, who responds with positive impoliteness, dismissing and ignoring what Merida tries to tell her. One prime example of this occurs only ten minutes into the film (10:20–10:38):

Merida: Mum, you'll never guess what I did today.

Elinor: (distractedly) Mmm?

Merida: I climbed the Crone's Tooth and drank from the Fire Falls.

Fergus: (impressed) Fire Falls? They say only the ancient kings were brave enough to drink the fire. (chuckles)

Elinor: (distractedly) What did you do, dear?

Merida: (sighing) Nothing, Mum.

In this dialogue, Queen Elinor is reading some papers and only pays attention to Merida long enough to scold her for having a weapon on the table, then set up the conversation to tell her that she will be getting married.

This pattern of ignoring goes both ways. Later, Merida ignores her mother after serving her a magical pastry that is supposed to change her mother, asking for Queen Elinor's opinion on the marriage, rather than addressing the sickness that has suddenly beset the Queen.

In *The Little Mermaid*, King Triton interrupts Ariel just slightly more often than she interrupts him (five vs. three times), but

it seems that he is trying to be a firm parent and maintain control in the face of a rebellious teenager, as opposed to ignoring or discounting her opinion. The best example of this is about twelve minutes into the film (11:46–13:17):

Triton: Do you think I want to see my youngest daughter snared by a fish-eater’s hook?

Ariel: (indignant, pulling away) I’m sixteen years old. I’m not a child—(anymore)

Triton: (interrupting) Don’t you take that tone of voice with me, young lady! As long as you live under my ocean, you’ll obey my rules!

Ariel: (smacks lips) But if you would just listen—

Triton: (interrupting) Not another word! And I am never, *never*, to hear of you going to the surface again! Is that clear?!

In this quote, it becomes clear that Triton thinks Ariel’s actions are putting her in danger, and he wants to keep her safe. Because of his concern, he starts with a mild tone and tries to reason with her. This conversation would likely be one that Blum-Kulka would argue “is *neutral*, or unmarked, in regard to politeness” (1990, p. 269, original italics), as his intention is clear—he is telling her not to break merpeople law. He only becomes louder, more forceful, and more direct as Ariel resists him.

After analyzing King Triton’s possible reasoning, one must ask what Queen Elinor’s motivation is in her impoliteness toward Merida. How much of her intent is to be impolite, and how much is simply a queen trying to raise a good princess? This is at least partially addressed by the film when Elinor expresses confusion and frustration at not being able to connect or communicate with Merida. King Fergus then tries to help Queen Elinor know what to say and how to say it by role-playing with her. Fergus pretends to be Merida while Elinor practices communicating.

One major difference in this regard between Queen Elinor and King Triton is that Ariel is Triton’s seventh daughter. He has been a father to a moody teenage girl six times already, and he knows what he is doing. Merida is Queen Elinor’s

oldest child. She is still new to having a teenager, especially when compared to Triton, and is very critical of Merida at the start of the film. About six minutes into the movie (from 6:15 to 6:48), *Brave* shows a montage of Queen Elinor criticizing everything Princess Merida does. These are the first instances of impoliteness shown in the film, and in those thirty-three seconds, Queen Elinor makes fourteen comments that draw attention to Merida's flaws and tell her what she must do to be perfect. This is her attempt at instructing Merida and helping her become what she will need to be to be a good queen in the future—a sentiment she expresses clearly to King Fergus but struggles to communicate to Merida.

Over the course of *Brave*, there are exactly as many instances of negative impoliteness (invading space, casting doubt, pointing out debt, highlighting flaws, etc.) as of positive impoliteness (twenty-eight instances of each), but the negative impoliteness came almost exclusively from Queen Elinor, who uses negative impoliteness in twenty-four of those twenty-eight instances, as opposed to Merida, who is shown using negative impoliteness only four times. All the data for this study is broken down by speaker, film, type, and subtype of impoliteness in Table 1 below.

As this table shows, the parents in both films exhibited more impoliteness than their daughters. Queen Elinor exhibited more impoliteness than Merida (thirty-six instances, compared to nineteen), and King Triton more so than Ariel (six instances to four). Additionally, there were nearly six times more instances of impoliteness in *Brave* than in *The Little Mermaid*. Both of these observations show that Disney princesses are getting less polite over time, supporting the claim that Disney princess films are growing ever more impolite.

This trend may stem from more than a simple, nameless desire to create a rude generation. Benabdellah (2018) argues that “females opt for impoliteness to claim power” (p. 44). In this way, Disney may be selecting more impolite language to create stronger female leads. This would teach the youth to speak up for themselves and fight against

perceived injustices—a popular opinion of our time. However, this would also imply that the female leads of the past, who emulated virtues like patience, kindness, forgiveness, and humility, were weak and that we no longer value those characteristics. Such changes may result in a sense of entitlement and the perceived approval of selfish actions and ideologies that hurt other people. Caution and a keen eye for

**Table 1**  
*Disney Film Impoliteness Counts*

Movie	Person	Positive				Negative				Mock		Totals	
		Interrupting	Ignoring	Being Argumentative	Using Obscure, Secretive Language	Invading Space and Breaking Things	Doubling	Pointing Out Debt or Flaws	Total	Sarcasm	Total		
<i>The Little Mermaid</i>	Ariel	3	0	1	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	4	
	Triton	5	0	0	0	5	1	0	0	1	0	0	6
	Total	8	0	1	0	9	1	0	0	1	0	0	10
<i>Brave</i>	Merida	1	10	2	0	13	1	1	2	4	2	2	19
	Elinor	4	8	0	3	15	2	1	21	24	0	0	39
	Total	5	18	2	3	28	3	2	23	28	2	2	58

unintended consequences should be employed when making any change that can affect future generations.

## **Conclusion**

It is clear from the data that protagonists in Disney films are using more impoliteness than they have previously, but what is not clear is whether this increase is the result or cause of an increase in impoliteness in society at large. Impoliteness in media may well be merely a side effect of a far more global trend toward impoliteness, but it may also be driving that shift. As children see more impoliteness in the media they consume, they are raised to believe that the impoliteness found in film is not only acceptable but encouraged in their interactions with others. As these children grow, they become the adults that govern society and create media for their own children. They will have to decide whether to continue this cycle of increasing impoliteness or break this tradition and show more extensions of love and compassion in the media they create. As Binkley (2016) points out, in the eyes of Disney, “profit will always weigh heavier than ethicality” (2016, p. 17). Thus, if parents disapprove of the message Disney sends with its increasing impoliteness, they must personally take a stand rather than waiting for corporations to change their ways, either by making their opinion known or simply choosing something else to show their children.



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