



Linguistic sexism in mermaid tales

A study of linguistic sexism involving the mermaid figure in films

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1. Introduction

Every language reflects the prejudices of the society in which it evolved. Since English, through most of its history, evolved in a white Anglo-Saxon, patriarchal society, no one should be surprised that its vocabulary and grammar frequently reflect attitudes that exclude or demean women. (Miller and Swift in Graddol and Swann, 1989:95)

The English language is affected by various circumstances in its very foundation, its grammatical structure, such as contemporary values in a patriarchal society (Graddol and Swann, 1989:132). Due to this bias, linguistic sexism occurs: women, and men, may be discriminated systematically within a language on the sole basis of their gender. According to Graddol and Swann (1989:52), women are historically not as important in their own right as men are, but rather classified with regards to their relationships with men; their husbands and fathers. This phenomenon lives on in titles; the neutral *mr.* for men and *mrs.* and *miss* for women which reveal their marital status and hence importance. Today, however, a third option has been introduced: *ms*, letting the marital status remain unknown.

Being important in their own right, men have also been the representative sex in the English language when discussing all of humanity: a person with an unknown gender and professions, the so called generic *he* or *man* as seen in proverbs and words such as *mankind* or *fireman* (Graddol and Swann, 1989:101). When discussing women the words have been semantically marked with a female suffix: *actress*. The male version of the word is most often neutral and can be used for both sexes, such as the word *dog*.

When it comes to linguistic sexism in fairy tales Robinson (2010) performed a study on language and gender in fairy tales and found that the descriptions of males and females differs immensely. The focus when describing girls is mainly their appearance and true goodness, whereas boys are described according to size and mental skills (Robinson, 2010:103). For a boy, it is not difficult to become the hero of the story since not much is required of him: he can be dumb and lazy and still succeed. A heroine however is required to be beautiful, white, pious, pure, good, not proud, industrious and not to mention: unsexed (Robinson, 2010:149). Levorato (2003) made a similar study on fairy tales and found that the choices of collocations, adjectives and verbs express linguistic sexism. The girl was often described as little, which associates to cuteness and had often feminine, yet undesired, attributes like vanity, naivety and promiscuity which consequently put her into trouble (Levorato, 2003:55). The verbs that describe her actions are mainly in a passive form, whereas the actions done by males are active (Levorato, 2003:66). In *The Little Mermaid* there seem to be similar tendencies, to keep the mermaid passive as well as unsexed (Van Hees, 2004:262).

According to research, Robinson (2010:149ff) explains, fairy tales help children discover their place in society which influences to a great extent the way they apprehend the world around them and

their place in it. The stories affect the children's behavioural patterns and teach them what is rewarding versus what is punitive. By re-telling old stories differently we may be able to counter social values and norms that we do not wish to support (Robinson, 2010:149).

Today, old fairy tales are retold by the media of film within popular culture, which is, to a great extent, the new arena of education for youths (Giroux, 2010:1). Even if they are not explicitly based on former stories, they have their roots in them and are highly affected by intertextuality, claims Greenhill and Matrix (2010:12), giving the examples of *Maid in Manhattan* as a Cinderella story, *Dirty Dancing* as *The Ugly Duckling*, and *Splash* as a modern version of *The Little Mermaid* by Hans Christian Andersen. However, films as an aspect of the mass-media, exercise "hidden power" over the audience by referring to "common" knowledge in order to reach as many as possible, which might empower already existing stereotypes (Fairclough, 1989:52). In doing so, partially by the usage of sexist language, Doyle (1998:150) means that we promote sexist stereotypes in society which are not only harmful and makes women and their achievements invisible, but also exclude more than half the population since the white, heterosexual male is the norm.

1.1 Aim and scope

The aim of this investigation is to study linguistic sexism involving the mermaid as a fairy tale creature in three movies. Research findings have established that linguistic sexism occurs in human languages, in this case English, and the purpose of this study is to investigate if the mermaid figure becomes the object or user of linguistic sexism. The aspects of linguistic sexism that are being investigated are the generic *man*, non-parallel structure and expressed ideals for men and women in choice of words which all are examples of the role of language when it comes to promoting sexist stereotypes. The purpose is to see if these phenomena occur in verbal conversation in the films whenever anyone touches upon the topic of mermaids or when a mermaid participates in conversation.

1.2 Material

The media of fictive films constitutes the material for this study and the verbal conversation will be analysed in three full-length films. The movies have been chosen from an Ezine article (2010) listing the top ten mermaid films, choosing from the limited collection of mermaid-themed films. In this study, non-American films were excluded as well as old or short films, since the three chosen movies ought to be in English as well as well-known and modern in order to have influence of people of today. All three movies are love stories between a human and a mermaid, giving opportunity to discover how the linguistic cultures of mermaids and humans may clash and might differ. One movie is directed to children, one to teenagers and one to adults, bringing variation and different

perspectives to the study which will be discussed. The movies are, in chronological order according to production year: *Splash* from 1984, *The Little Mermaid* from 1989 and *Aquamarine* from 2006. The main characters of these films are mainly female, but in addition there are several male characters as well, giving insight on sexist language involving both women and men.

1.3 Method

The method of this study is qualitative with instances of quantitative elements, namely to analyse linguistic sexism that is expressed verbally in the movies at full length about female and male characters in order to decide if mermaids are described differently than humans. The description of humans is likely to align with the research concerning linguistic sexism in English which is done by Graddol and Swann (1989), McConnell-Ginet (2008), Holmes (2003) etcetera, whereas the descriptions of the mermaids might not apply or differ. The different aspects of linguistic sexism that are being analysed are the following: the generic *man*, non-parallel structure as well as expressed ideals for women versus men in the verbal conversation of the three films. The instances of words such as *woman*, *man*, *mermaid* and *merman* will be counted in order to decide the generic of humans and merfolk: which occur the most and if the words carry generic traits. The structure of the words *mermaid* and *merman* will also be analysed in order to investigate possible inherited non-parallel structure. Lastly, the values of both humans and merfolk will be investigated through their word choices when they express certain ideals for males and females.

Linguistic sexism helps reinforce harmful stereotypes and a norm which excludes half the human population. The chosen aspects of linguistic sexism in this study are especially harmful when it comes to constructing reality with language and hence affecting the attitude towards the genders, and will therefore be investigated. First the generic *man* which excludes female experiences, secondly the phenomenon of non-parallel structure which mediates women more negatively as well as the ideals of how women and men should be, on the basis of word choice, which promotes stereotypes and moulds gender-bound identities. The quantitative aspect of analysis will help support and confirm theories by counting and finding patterns of words, such as mapping out the generic *man* in the human world, which will give the result of the study a degree of objectivity.

2. Theoretical Background

Graddol and Swann (1989:96) define sexism as any discrimination against women or men because of their sex made on irrelevant grounds, such as excluding men from discussions about raising children as if they have a secondary role in the matter. However, sexism towards women has been taken more seriously. Hence *linguistic* sexism is sexism within a language; sexual discrimination permeating the very system of a language: from the grammatical foundation to the nouns. Using sexist language

promotes and perpetuates stereotypes about men's and women's roles in society, which as a result leads to exclusion of women from work places or men from childrearing (Doyle, 1998:150).

In order to understand the world around us we have to name it, but by naming it we create a pattern which also allows us to manipulate our environment because the tool we use to categorise with, language, is "a powerful determinant of reality" (Spender, 1998:96). However, the categories that we have invented, such as the "male-as-norm" and "female as the deviant", has become constructions in which we have trapped our language and thought patterns, which consequently restrains us from organising the world in a different manner (Spender, 1998:96).

In the theoretical background of this essay the different aspects of linguistic sexism will be introduced, followed by linguistic sexism in fairy tales, a presentation of the mermaid, film as the new media for story-telling and Disney.

2.1 The Generic Man

In the construction of the English language, according to Spender (1998:96), we have categorised human beings into two major categories depending on their biological sex: "male-as-norm" and "female-as-deviant". The male is the norm, the gender which has been used systematically to represent all of human kind, the work place and a person with an unknown gender. *Mankind*, *manpower*, *man-hour* and *prehistoric man* are some examples of the generic man which, in theory, refers to any human irrespective of sex (Graddol and Swann, 1989:101). For example, the neutral words *lion* and *dog* bring to mind the whole species even though they originally meant *male lion* and *male dog*. A female word needs to be semantically marked, such as the female dog *bitch* and a female lion: *lioness*. With animals this system of the male as a representative works since we can use sentences such as *on the farm there were two dogs, a bitch and her puppy*. When discussing humans the system fails since female experiences, such as child birth, cannot be discussed with the help of *man*. According to Doyle (1998:150) many speakers accept sentences like nr 1.) but not nr 2.) below, which reveals that *man* brings male images to mind exclusively, not female experiences, and can therefore not be used as a representative of humanity.

1.) *Man's vital interests are food, shelter and access to females.*

2.) *Man, unlike other mammals, has difficulties in giving birth.*

Historically, men have been the dominant sex in the work place whereas women stayed at home to take care of the chores and children. Naturally, this is reflected in the language within this semantic field: *fireman*, *chairman*, *businessman*. Even the neutral professional titles such as *actor* are seen as male and in order to show that a female holds the position it has to be semantically marked: *actress*

or *waitress*. Today, however, any work position can be held by a woman and options have to be presented due to a growing demand. Neutral forms such as *chairperson* have been introduced due to the power of linguistic intervention (Graddol and Swann, 1989:102). Doyle (1998:151) promotes the existence of both a feminine and a masculine form of the word, such as *spokesman* and *spokeswoman*, in order to make women and their achievements visible.

However, Black and Coward (1998:108) enlighten how many words without a gender specification may be used with the same pattern as the generic *man*, as seen here:

- 1.) *People will give up their wives but not their power*
- 2.) *Americans of higher status have less chance of having a fat wife*
- 3.) *Young people should be out there interfering with the local maidens*

People, *Americans* and *young people* all intend the male half of the human population in these sentences, which is seen by their female partners which are excluded linguistically. This shows that the generic man is extended to a variety of terms.

The phenomenon of the generic masculine is not only visible within nouns, but within the very syntax and grammar of the English language. English lacks a gender neutral pronoun when we wish to discuss someone of unknown gender, which is mainly seen in proverbs: *as a man sows, so shall he reap*. When an author is about to discuss someone of an unknown gender, there are three options: *his/her*, *his* or *their*. According to Graddol and Swann (1989:106) *his/her* is seen as clumsy whereas only *his* is traditionally correct while *her* only would cause confusion. The only option left when wanting to be neutral yet eloquent is *their*, despite the fact that it is grammatically incorrect because of its plural form.

2.2. Non-parallel Structure

Another aspect of linguistic sexism is non-parallel treatment of male and female subjects, with Doyle's (1998:153) example of the terms "Essex man" and "Essex girl". Calling women "girls" and men "men" in the same context belittles women and gives the impression that they are taken less seriously. Another type of non-parallel structure involves connotations: the feminine form is very often derogatory or negative while the masculine form is positive or neutral (Doyle, 1998:153). The words *ladies' man* and *man-eater* for example. Similarly, the negative female forms rarely have male counterparts, or are seldom used: the widely common word *nymphomania* which describes sexually active and eager women has a male equivalent which is rarely heard: *satyriasis*. According to Hughes (2006:326) in *an Encyclopedia of Swearing* a major part of the vocabulary of swearing has generated

from promiscuity. However, there is a great imbalance between the words categorising women and men as sexually promiscuous: the majority of the words apply to women and are often more forceful and negative. The small field of words dedicated to men is as Doyle describes: neutral or even positive, to add a couple of more examples: *sugar daddy*, *stud*, *Don Juan* etcetera. Many swear words derive from animal terms, such as *pig* for men, whereas *bitch*, a female dog, is the most common in use for women. Originally it referred to a sensual or promiscuous woman, behaving like a female dog in heat.

2.2.1 Titles

Cameron (1999:85) notes that we don't discuss *man/woman*, but rather *man/not-man*: "It is one sex, man, around whom everything evolves". The way we address women and men is based on this concept and is therefore non-parallel: men were historically important in their own right and therefore addressed with the neutral title *mr.* (Graddol and Swann, 1989:97). Women on the other hand could be addressed differently depending on their marital status, *miss* was the title for unmarried women and *mrs.* for married. In other words, their importance was measured by their relationships with men. A third option has been introduced today which does not reveal the marital status: *ms.* The traditional system of surnames has the same function. A young unmarried woman likely has her father's family name until she marries and adopts her husband's surname, strengthening the indication of women as men's property (Graddol and Swann, 1989:97).

The most respectful terms are *sir* for men and *ma'am* for women, but they are by no means equivalent (McConnell-Ginet, 2008:86). *Ma'am* competes with *miss*; they are used in different contexts concerning age or position. Neither has the same authority as *sir*, rendering them non-parallel. Due to this, it is getting increasingly common to refer to female police officers as *sir*, to avoid the femaleness of the standard *ma'am* that tends to limit the ability to confer real authority (McConnell-Ginet, 2008:86).

In America, it is common for young people to address older women with the social title plus the given name: *Miss Anne*, which combines intimacy and familiarity with respect and the difference in age (McConnell-Ginet, 2008:81). For men it is more common to use the social title along with a shortened version of the surname: *Mr Mac*. Regionally, this is frequently used by children to teachers of both sexes with the difference that they shorten the surname to the first letter: *Ms. G* and *Mr. G*. (McConnell-Ginet, 2008:81).

When discussing more general terms it seems they have become less gendered, such as the word *guys* and *dude* are no longer confined to men only. The single form, *guy*, is still referring to a male but in plural: *you guys*, the group can be of mixed genders or even all-female (McConnell-Ginet,

2008:84). It has become a popular alternative to the more formal *ladies*, the equivalent *gals* or the possibly condescending *girls*.

2.3. Ideals for Men and Women

In this section linguistic ideals for men and women will be discussed first, followed by a short discussion of linguistic terms that promote or discourage certain behaviour for the genders.

According to Coates (2004:23) there is an old belief that women talk too much, an idea which is reflected in proverbs throughout the world: "A woman's tongue wags like a lamb's tail". In early literature there is a clear ideal of silence for women and their ability to remain silent tests their obedience and their loyalty to their husbands (Coates, 2004:25). This is reflected in fairy tales where the heroine in *the Six Swans* can save everyone just by remaining quiet (Robinson, 2010:26).

If silence is a virtue for women, eloquence is the virtue for men. Even today girls are encouraged in school to be silent by teachers and in many cultures silence is imposed on women in religious contexts (Coates, 2004:25ff). However, there is no evidence that women talk more than men. If silence is the desired state for women, then anything she says will be too much (Coates, 2004:26). When it comes to men, they are not allowed to resemble women. According to Graddol and Swann (1989:18) men and women have the possibility to speak with a higher or lower pitch since it is not biologically determined, but there are high penalties for men who do speak with a higher pitch which will cause them to become objects of ridicule. The opposite can be beneficial for women, if not necessary, which is illustrated by the politician Margaret Thatcher who received voice training to lower her pitch in order to be taken seriously as prime minister (Graddol and Swann, 1989:38).

The definition of *tomboy*, the word for girls who resemble boys, explains it objectively and without much judgment: "a young girl who enjoys activities and games that are traditionally considered to be for boys" (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2010:1630). However, if a boy is interested in girl's activities there is immediately a penalty. The word for it, *sissy*, has negative connotations and has the meaning of "a boy that other men or boys laugh at because they think he is weak or frightened, or only interested in the sort of things girls like" according to the dictionary of Oxford (2010:1437). The label "sissy" operates as an insult for boys while the equivalent of "tomboy" for girls does not (Hall, 2008:368).

Hall (2008:367) describes this phenomenon with the help of a study performed by Maccoby who argues that the force that binds groups of boys together is much stronger than the one for girls, resulting in a much more exclusionary kind of play. Therefore, boys have a much greater need to be recognized by other boys, a process in which one becomes masculine by becoming "not-feminine", excluding the so called "sissies" (Hall, 2008:367). This process starts at an early age since it has been

found that boys in preschool might accuse other boys of being sissies if their activities are deemed too girlish, something which does not occur as strongly in all-girl groups against tomboys because they can be feminine without having to prove that they are not masculine (Hall, 2008:367). However, in older research by Lakoff from 1975, when it was important for women to be lady-like, it has been found that tomboys were laughed at (Hall, 2008:368). Today there is less pressure from parents on being lady-like and girls are entering formerly male-dominant fields such as team sports. However, even if being a tomboy might be more accepted than being a "sissy", it will still be difficult to have a "gender deviant" identity in their teen years in school (Hall, 2008:368).

2.4. Linguistic Sexism in Fairy Tales

In three separate studies of language and sexism in fairy tales; one of Grimm's fairy tales performed by Robinson, one of the versions of *The Little Red Riding Hood* by Levorato and one in Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid* by Annelies van Hees, sexist language was found in the usage of adjectives, collocations, narration, gender articles and verbs.

Male and female characters are often described with a very different set of adjectives and collocations in fairy tales. Robinson (2010:103) found that the focus when describing the female characters in Grimm is their appearance and goodness. Not only are these traits the most important, but they are also connected since goodness and beauty are linked together while naughty female villains are ugly (Robinson, 2010:107). Similarly, Levorato (2003:55) found that the heroine in *The Little Red Riding Hood* had typical feminine attributes such as vanity, naivety and sensuality which would then lead her into serious trouble.

When it comes to boys, size and mental skills are mainly described in Grimm and it is not difficult for a boy to become a hero since not much is required of him: in spite of being lazy or dumb he can still succeed (Robinson, 2010:103). Here, a heroine faces much higher expectations because she needs to be beautiful, pure, good, white, industrious, pious, not proud and unsexed (Robinson, 2010:149). The demands on a heroine are heavier than those for a hero, potentially mediating to little boys growing up with these fairy tales that they can always succeed no matter who they are, while little girls learn from the traditional *The Little Red Riding Hood* that obedience is rewarded, that adventurous girls are dangerous and that it is better to keep on the path (Robinson, 2010:151). Research findings prove that fairy tales help children discover their place in society and is part of their socialization process, so by rewriting old stories we might be able to counter social values and norms that we do not want to support (Robinson, 2010:149ff).

Generally, the focus is on girls' appearances and boy's actions. This concept is shown throughout the verbs in the different versions of *The Little Red Riding Hood*, according to Levorato (2003:66),

since the verbs that describe the girl's actions are mostly in a passive form whereas the actions that the wolf performs are active and with clear goals, making him fully in control of people and events. Similarly, the mermaid in *The Little Mermaid* is passive and has the narrator explain everything to her what has happened and what will happen (Van Hees, 2004:262). The transitivity choices that the author makes greatly affects the reader's impression of the characters as active or passive, concluding that awareness of linguistic choices may create equal relations of power in a text (Levorato, 2003:65).

In Grimm, another linguistic choice has to be made concerning the German language since they have gender articles. Robinson (2010:154) found that the goodness and pureness of girls are enhanced by the articles which change throughout the story. The pronouns for boys remain the same: *er/him*, but girls have different pronouns depending on their status: a young or good girl is described with the pronoun *es/ it*, whereas older women or bad women are described with the pronoun *sie/her* (Robinson, 2010:154). According to Robinson (2010:155) the girls at the age of twelve seem to be considered mature for sexual activity or marriage in Grimm, which then also changes the pronouns used for them from *es* (it) to *sie* (her).

Ideally, the heroine should be pure and unsexed, but she cannot marry a man while being sexless. For example, the pronoun for *Rapunzel* changes to *sie* when she becomes available for sex or marriage. In *The Six Swans* the girl remains an *es* up to the point where the king proposes (Robinson, 2010:156). In other words, the gender articles for females indicate womanhood, but also naughtiness, age and sexual maturity. The gender articles are not used for male characters in this way at all. In *The Little Mermaid*, the young mermaid is a pre-sexual being as seen by her tail and the blue world she lives in, she longs to explore her sexuality in the red world above them and the pain she feels when she has legs symbolizes the transition from girl to woman. However, she is still a child and acts like one, which causes her to end up in the same place where the story began; in the blue sky of the daughters of the air, without having become a sexual being according to Van Hees (2004:265).

Most of these fairy tales derive from a time when religion was a very important part of life, which shines through either directly or indirectly through various religious themes (Bettelheim, 1977:13). The wolf in *Little Red Riding Hood* can be interpreted as Satan whom leads the virgin astray from the path of righteousness whereas the hunter is the good, protective father figure, similar to God. A link to the god Chronos swallowing his own children has also been made (Bettelheim, 1977:13). The wolf is seductive of the all too young girl with the cap, the attractive cap of the violent and sexual colour red that invites that sort of attention which she is too young to cope with. She has been warned to stay on the right path and not indulge in pleasure which the wolf offers her, as when he asks her to get into the bed with him (Bettelheim, 1977:172ff). Due to the old age of the fairy tales and the oral tradition of story-telling, Bettelheim (1977:5) believes that they do not teach children much about the

modern society around them, but rather about the inner lives of humans. The old stories deal with the most basic human drives and emotions, the deepest and most violent of human conflicts, which help the children to find solutions and to deal with it themselves. That is why the fairy tales are important contributions to children's psychological development, according to Bettelheim (1977:10-12). Nonetheless, the stories are old and promote old values such as pureness and goodness: appropriate behaviour which has its roots in Christianity, and live on today through different versions and different medias to children everywhere.

2.5 The Mermaid

The treacherous mermaid, seductive and impenetrable female representative of the dark and magic underwater world from which our life comes and in which we cannot live, lures voyagers to their doom (Dinnerstein, 1976:5).

As so many other mythological creatures such as the minotaur, nymphs or centaurs, the mermaid symbolizes aspects of human sexuality, claims Dinnerstein (1976:5) since the mermaid is seductive yet impenetrable since she has no vagina. Many of the figures are half human and half animal, conveying the idea of how humans are both similar to yet different from animals.

According to Briggs (1976:287) the mermaid features in folklore all around the world and is clearly defined as a beautiful maiden from the waist upwards and with a fish's tail, often seen with a comb and mirror combing her long beautiful hair while singing irresistibly. This image of the mermaid dates back to her origins and has been kept almost unaltered until today. Mermaids are known to seduce sailors, luring them to their death. Mermaids' appearance is also ominous of storms and other disasters. However, there are also kind mermaids who rescue men and their loved ones through their knowledge (Briggs, 1976:289).

A merman is rather described as wilder and uglier than mermaids and he is not as interested in humanity and the land above as mermaids are (Briggs, 1976:290). The Scandinavian mermen are described as handsome though, and it is mermen who create storms at sea according to the stories that Briggs (1976:290) are referring to. The word "mermaid" is a compound of two Old English words, *mere* meaning sea and *maid* meaning a young girl, creating the word *mermayde* which came in use during Middle English (Etymonline, 2013). The equivalent term in Old English was *merewif*, deviating from the old word *wif* meaning *woman*, which has later turned into *wife*. The definition is "an imaginary creature described in stories, with the upper body of a woman and the tail of a fish" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2013).

Today, the mythological creature to appear most in popular culture is the vampire in numerous films such as *Twilight*, *Dracula* etcetera. However, the mermaid has gained increased popularity and is

on the rise too according to Brenda Peterson (2013) in her new book *Mermaids rising: Why Fins are the New Fangs*. Both authors, movie directors and singers such as Madonna or Lady Gaga have included mermaid elements in their work today, a trend which is spreading in media.

2.6 Film: The New Media of Story-telling

Many of the films of today are reinterpretations of old fairy tales such as *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty* and *The Little Mermaid*, retold through a new media that reaches out to a broader audience in a modernised way (Greenhill and Matrix, 2010:12). This intertextuality between film and text, Monaco (2004:44) explains, is a result of a strong bond developed between novels and films due to the narrative potential: both tell long, detailed stories from the perspective of a narrator and both are based on scripted language. For a publisher it is even the prime consideration to recycle popular novels in their films today, which unfortunately might reduce the novels to look like first drafts in the making of films (Monaco, 2004:45).

However, there are differences between the two medias; whereas books only have language to narrate with, films mainly use pictorial narration combined with dialogue (Monaco, 2004:44). A movie is also limited to a shorter narration than a book, but may be capable to compensate for this through its pictorial possibilities and transferring more details at one time.

The conventional model for most scriptwriting is "selective naturalism", meaning that the writer selects from the whole vocabulary of expressions in everyday life which will contribute to the feeling of plausibility and naturalness even though creating a highly artificial and dramatic scene, in order to connect with the audience (Wells, 2003).

As in fairy tales, the appearance of girls is very important as well as the desire to keep them unsexed (see section 2.6). In movies, this is shown by the "voyeuristic gaze" where the camera films what the male character sees when he is looking at a woman, forcing the viewer to adopt a male position, zooming in at her various body parts objectifying her body (Smelik, 2009:180). In older movies, this erotic gaze conceals a fear of the female, different, body, according to Smelik (2009) leading to violence, such as rape or murder. This is still present in modern films where the sexually active woman is often the one who dies first, as if punished for her active sexuality. Today, the "voyeuristic gaze" has been extended to males as well in advertising, fashion and soaps.

In Hollywood films, there is a conventional structure: good wins over bad, son wins over father, hero gets the girl, the dangerous woman (or homosexual) is punished or killed and order is restored (Smelik, 2009:180). Within this formula, there is little room for female identification other than that female power is negative and that women are objects for men to pursue. There are however ways of creating female subjectivity, by letting her dominate the look of the camera from a "neutral" viewer

hence blocking the voyeuristic gaze in favour of her own narcissistic identification as well as representing an inner life on the screen such as dreams, fantasies and hallucinations (Smelik, 2009:180).

2.6.1 Presentation of the Three Mermaid Movies

The oldest of the films is *Splash*, directed by Ron Howard in 1984 and starring Tom Hanks and Daryl Hannah. It was the first film Disney released under the label of Touchstone pictures due to the film's content; language and some nudity, which was deemed inappropriate to be associated with Disney (Toennies, 2004). It was embraced by media and it received awards for Best Actress and Screenplay as well as positioning itself as the tenth most grossing movie in 1984 (Box Office Mojo, 2013). Daryl Hannah was perfect for the role since she used to swim with her legs together as a little girl, fascinated by the Hans Christian Andersen story *The Little Mermaid*, and could therefore swim fast, act and hold her breath up to sixty seconds, not requiring a stunt (Toennies, 2004). Hundreds of little girls have later contacted Hannah, wanting to share their love for the film (Toennies, 2004). The film is about Alan who nearly drowned by Cape Cod as a child but who was rescued by a mermaid. Twenty years later he runs the family business, takes care of his childish brother and tries desperately to find true love. He returns to Cape Cod almost to drown once again, and he is rescued by the same mermaid. He lost his wallet in the process which is of help to the mermaid in finding him again: she walks up on land and they fall in love. The mermaid Madison may only stay on land for a couple of days or she will never be able to return and she is afraid of letting Alan know the truth. However, a scientist realises her true nature and tries to reveal her in public by splashing her with water. He succeeds but regrets his decision when the mermaid is captured for experimenting and Alan is heartbroken when knowing her true nature. In the end, Alan realises his love for her and they succeed in getting her out. Madison had decided to stay with Alan forever, which is now impossible since they are being chased by media, which causes Alan to follow her into the sea instead.

The second movie in chronological order is Disney's *The Little Mermaid*, directed by Ron Clements and John Musker in 1989, starring Jodi Benson, Pat Carroll, Samuel E. Wright etcetera (IMDb, 2013a). It gained a lot of popularity amongst little girls when it was released as seen by the 84 million it brought in at the box office and the 9 million cassettes that was sold (Wasko, 2001:133). Like many early Disney movies it is based on a western fairy tale, the Danish *Den Lille Havfrue* by Hans Christian Andersen from 1837. The fairy tale was then moulded into the classic Disney formula with numerous changes, for example, the mermaid's ability to gain an immortal soul was not limited to marriage and the cost of her transition from mermaid to human was very painful (Wasko, 2001:134). The Disney version is about Triton's youngest daughter Ariel, a mermaid who is dissatisfied with life

under the sea because she longs to be amongst humans. Her father warns her about the barbarians above and forbids her to visit the surface, but after saving the handsome prince Eric she has fallen in love and is determined to succeed. When her father destroys all of the human treasures that she has collected, she turns for the sea witch Ursula to help. She agrees to give Ariel legs by the cost of her voice and she has to make Eric fall in love with her in three days. Eric does not believe that she is the girl who rescued him since she cannot sing like before, but he helps her and they slowly fall in love. Ursula interferes by pretending to be the girl who rescued Eric by using Ariel's voice, because she is afraid that Ariel will succeed and therefore ruin her plans to use Ariel to get to Triton and the whole kingdom. She gets her voice back and Eric realises who she is, but before they kiss time has run out and Ariel's soul belongs to Ursula. Triton trades in himself for her and Ursula gets hold of the trident and creates a storm. Prince Eric drives a sunken ship towards her, killing her and breaking her spell which turn every soul back into normal. In the end, Triton turns Ariel into a human so that she can get married to Eric.

The third and newest film is *Aquamarine* from 2006, directed by Elizabeth Allen and starring Emma Roberts, Joanna Levesque and Sara Paxton (IMDb, 2013b). It grossed 7,482,669 dollars in the USA during the opening weekend and it is based on the novel by Alice Hoffman, also filmed with some changes to the original story (IMDb, 2013b). For example, Aquamarine never gets legs in the novel as she does in the movie but is hidden in a long gown, sitting in a wheelchair, when meeting Raymond. In the movie, Aquamarine has fled from an arranged marriage and has come to shore to find love where she is discovered by the two teenagers Hailey and Claire who know everything there is to know about their crush, the life-guard Raymond. She gets legs instead of a tail but is not allowed to get them wet or have them at night. Her wedding in the sea is in three days, so she has to prove to her father that love exists before that or he will make her come home. She asks the two girls for help in return for granting a wish, which they are eager to use in order to make Hailey, who is about to move far away, to stay. The boy Aquamarine chose happens to be Raymond, to the girls' dismay, but their knowledge about him along with a dozen teenage magazines help them create romantic moments for them, and they are slowly falling in love. However, when it is time for her to prove that love exists he still does not love her, yet, but likes her a lot. The girl Cecilia who is also fond of Raymond knows the truth about her and pushes her into the water, turning her legs back into a tail. Her father then starts to pull her by heavy currents and strong winds and Raymond runs to get his board in order to save her. The girls get there first and they ask if they can use their wish to make her stay, because they love her. The weather suddenly clears up when the two girls, without knowing it, proved to her father that love exists. They still get their wish, but decide to wait with using it since Aquamarine promises to come and visit. Aquamarine and Raymond talk, kiss and decide to meet in Fiji sometime.

2.6.2 Disney

In the popular mind Walt Disney, both the man and the company, is synonymous with the notion of childhood innocence. As suburban America witnesses urban violence invading its own schools homes and neighbourhoods, Disney becomes a symbol for the security and romance of a small-town America of yesteryear - a pristine never-never land in which children's fantasies come true, happiness reigns, and innocence is kept safe through the magic of pixie dust. (Giroux, 2010:17).

It all started with the animated feature *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in 1937 and today Disney reaches children all over the world through the media of music, magazines, Internet, theme parks, clubs and the production of around one movie a year alongside thousands of merchandise products to accompany it (Wasko, 2001:72ff). Disney influences popular culture greatly; the primary arena in which education takes place, where youth of today learn about themselves, others and the world around them (Giroux, 2010:1). Disney offers children the opportunity to enter into a vibrant, imaginary world filled with fantasies, adventure and powerful emotional themes (Giroux, 2010:7). It escapes the discipline and regulation of school and offers desires and dreams: a contrast to the boredom and brutality of everyday life. However, these dreams are not as innocent as they seem and Disney must, according to Giroux (2010:7) and other critics, be interrogated for the future they envision and the values they promote, particularly with respect to their audience of children.

Due to this massive responsibility, recent criticism has been directed towards Disney. We tend to forget that Disney is a company like any other, with political and economic interests, and cannot dismiss everything as innocent "entertainment" (Wasko, 2001:3). By actively researching the interests of boys as well as teenagers Disney may produce more age- and gender-appropriate products such as *Disney XD* or *High School Musical*, with the intention of reaching as many children as possible for as long as possible, intending to turn them into life-long consumers (Giroux, 2010:3). Due to their different labels such as Touchstone, Hollywood and Caravan they also have the opportunity of reaching adults without having to be family-oriented or PG-rated (Wasko, 2001:43). However, when they sell their products, they also sell their values which are illustrated by the films: monarchy is the preferred way of government, people of colour are all too often described as barbaric or stupid and the heroines are slender dolls who are defined by the male characters around them (Giroux, 2010:157).

With regard to *The Little Mermaid*, Ariel is seen as an improved female role model by many analysts; she is sensual, rebellious, inquisitive, intelligent, mischievous and adventurous, in contrast to the very first Disney heroine Snow White who is motherly, naive, obedient and shy (Wasko, 2001:134). However, she still exemplifies the "beauty that characterizes all Disney heroines, with an extremely thin, shapely, even sensual figure" (Wasko, 2001:135), whereas the villains have distorted body shapes like Ursula who is obese. Also, both Ariel and Snow White are surrounded by male characters, dissatisfied

with their lives and wish to marry a prince to ensure happiness - some things in the Disney formula have obviously not changed (Wasko, 2001:134).

Ariel's struggle seems to be about parental control and a desire to explore the world, until she meets the prince (Giroux, 2010: 104). Marriage becomes the priority rather than becoming human, and in the end her father gives his permission, restraining Ariel from becoming independent. Her desire to become a citizen is now overruled by her desire to become a wife (Sells, 1995:181).

As in almost every Disney movie the worlds presented are patriarchies; dominated by men and with male leaders, indicating that leadership and independence are tied to patriarchal entitlement (Giroux, 2010:107). The power of men is seen as positive whereas the power of women is seen as negative; Ursula needs to be slaughtered and in the end it is Triton who turns Ariel human, costless (Wasko, 2001:134). Feminine power is clearly undermined, which is done by de-feminizing them as seen in Ursula; drawn after the famous drag queen Divine (Sells, 1995:182). This phenomenon is common amongst Disney villains; they are transgendered and have traits typical for the opposite sex, in contrast to the heroes/heroines who promote heterosexuality (Putnam, 2013:148).

Sells (1995:177) describes that *The Little Mermaid* may be metonymic for a woman's passing into the white male system according to bourgeois feminism: passing between gender privileges. The two worlds, land and sea, are contrasting spaces: one is real and one is fictive. The human world symbolizes the white male system, the dominant culture in American patriarchy, and the sea is the muted and marginalized cultures outside (Sells, 1995:177ff). Those who are privileged by the white male system are oblivious of what is outside, such as Eric who believes that a human girl rescued him as opposed to a mermaid. Those outside are, on the other hand, well aware of the dominant culture and their own marginalized cultures (Sells, 1995:177ff). The inhabitants of these cultures are often invisible to those within the white male system, which is seen amongst the sea creatures who often have facial features of people of colour. While in the sea they dance and sing, but when they enter the "real world" they risk becoming human food (Sells, 1995:178).

However, to enter the system sacrifices must be made. Ariel leaves her former life behind to gain mobility; mutilating her body, silencing her voice and sacrificing her connection to the feminine. Ursula tells her that her voice is useless on land: men do not like women who talk. The radical words from the villain are unfortunately proven right when the prince tries to bestow the kiss of true love on Ariel even though she has never spoken to him, limiting her to her feminine power to attract a man as her only form of identity in this world (Giroux, 2010:105). Ariel cannot both have voice and access, claims Sells (1995:179) and illustrates this with the example of Geraldine Ferraro who failed in her vice-presidential bid in part because voters thought her speaking style was too "masculine" and aggressive.

When entering land, Ariel must learn how to be a human. Ursula teaches her indirectly to not underestimate body language, to use makeup and to use the artifices and trappings of gendered behaviour (Sells, 1995:183). Ariel learns to "perform" woman, doing gender as a performed construct, which is shown when Eric finds her at the beach. She looks like a victim and he decides to take her home to help. The moment he turns around she smiles gladly at her companions out of sight who gives her thumbs up, revealing that she was playing, performing a female role of helplessness.

Hence, due to this distorted perception of gender and race in Disney, as illustrated by *The Little Mermaid* above, Giroux (2010:14) urges parents and pedagogues to be observant and not let these stereotypes pass by the children without reflection.

3. Analysis and Discussion

In this section the different aspects of linguistic sexism; non-parallel structure, the generic man and expressed ideals for men and women, will be analysed with regards to mermaids in the following movies; *Splash*, *The Little Mermaid* and *Aquamarine*.

3.1 The Non-parallel Structure of Merfolk

The non-parallel structure of words such as "men and girls" or "mrs/miss and mr" are examples of sexist language in which the word for women often is diminutive or has negative or sexual associations (see section 2.2). When discussing the fictive species of mermaids, there is non-parallel structure inherited in the very labelling of the female and male merfolk: *mermaid* and *merman*. If the structure would be parallel and symmetrical, they would be called *merman* and *merwoman*. However, if the word for *mermaid* would remain the same, there is no proper male equivalent due to the fact that men are not categorised according to marital status. As seen in section 2.2.1 women are addressed with regards to their relationships with men, with *miss* or *mrs*, while men are addressed with the neutral *mr*. The same phenomenon occurs in the word *maid* which in old use means "a young woman who is not married" (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2010:928).

In other words, the word for the female subject of the species of merfolk: *mermaid*, has sexual connotations similar to those used when addressing human women. However, today the word *maid* is used more liberally in words such as *chambermaid* or *barmaid*, no longer indicating unmarried status or virginity. The original roots of the word still exist though in words such as *maiden* for example, which may describe the very first voyage of a ship.

Why the mermaid has been determined a *maid*, an unmarried virgin girl, might be due to her traits as seductive yet impenetrable (see section 2.5). Without legs and genitalia she will remain a virgin forever. However, the image of the beautiful, seductive mermaid as an object of the sailor's lust - aboard

a ship without women in the middle of the sea for weeks - might not be as stimulating if she was seen as married and unavailable.

This phenomenon of built-in titles is enhanced by looking closer at other languages, specifically Indo-European languages. The word for mermaid in Swedish is *sjöjungfru* and the German word is *die Meerjungfrau* (see table 2). Both of them are, similarly to English, a compound word made up by the words for *sea* and *maid* respectively (see section 2.5). However, the Danish and Norwegian word for mermaid, *Havfrue* (see table 2), also contains a female title revealing marital status, but this time the word means *wife*. This is close to the original word from Old English, *merewif*, which at the time translated into *merwoman* but today translates literally to *merwife* (see section 2.5). In all of the languages mentioned there is however a feminine title revealing marital status inherited in the very word for *mermaid*, which creates a non-parallel structure when mentioning both *mermaid* and *merman*.

In the three films, these addressing titles are often used in the human world. Hailey calls Claire's grandparents *Mr. B* and *Mrs. B* in *Aquamarine*, which is typically used in America amongst young people, according to McConnel-Ginet (2008) (see section 2.2.1). The titles are also widely used in *Splash* where characters like *Mrs. Stimler*, *Mr. Buyrite* and *Miss Simkins* appear, whereas only *miss* and *madame* appears in *The Little Mermaid*. None of the merfolk use these titles when addressing someone in neither of the films, but the mermaids Ariel and Madison are politely addressed as *miss* by humans when they are on land, due to their youthful appearance and the inherited assumption that they are unmarried (see section 2.2.1).

3.2 The Generic Mermaid

According to research, the generic *he* or *man* is used systematically in English in proverbs, professions and when discussing someone of unknown gender (see section 2.1). This is seen throughout the movies in the human world. Following are some examples in (1)-(4):

- (1) *Fight like a man* (The Little Mermaid, 1989:0:52:14).
- (2) *Weather man says there's a big storm coming* (Aquamarine, 2006:0:06:00).
- (3) *This guy's for you* (Aquamarine, 2006:0:37:05).
- (4) *I want a kid and I wanna go and see him play a tooth in his school play* (Splash, 1984:00:14:59).
- (5) *The ray he can play the lings on the strings, the trout rockin' out, the blackfish she sings* (The Little Mermaid, 1989:0:29:32).

Sentences (1) to (4) all occur in the human world and demonstrate different aspects of the generic man. The expression seen in (1) is spoken by an angry chef to a crab in a quarrel, which may indicate masculinity since they are both male and should prove this in a "man-to-man" fight. It might also indicate humanity, as a generic, since the crab is not human and should fight like one. Both humanity and masculinity can therefore be read into *man* in his statement. A common use of the generic man is in professional titles (see section 2.1) which is demonstrated by the weatherman in (2). Another aspect of the usage of the generic man and he is when discussing someone of unknown gender which is seen in (3) and (4). When Raymond gives his street fair prize, an inflatable dolphin, to Aquamarine and says *this guy's for you*, he thinks of the dolphin as a *he*. Even though *guys* in plural has come to include people of both sexes, as seen in the films where the word is used for a mixed sex group or sometimes only females such as referring to a couple in *Splash* or the female friends in *Aquamarine*, the word *guy* still only refers to men (see section 2.2.1). The dolphin of unknown gender then becomes a boy because of the generic *he* and its neutrality over the female pronoun. Alan uses it too in *Splash* when he says that he wants a kid and that he will go see *him* in school plays as seen in (4), which is an example of a gender neutral word used with the same pattern as the generic *man* (see section 2.1).

In the sea however, *The Little Mermaid* gives an example of variation of these pronouns where both *he* and *she* is used in (5), not demonstrating the generic *he* as strongly as in the human world. However, in both *Aquamarine* and *The Little Mermaid* a female suffix occurs in the word *princess*, used mostly about humans but also about Ariel in a diminutive way by the villain Ursula. Excluding female names, *princess* seems to be the only title marked with a female suffix, in this case *-ess* (see section 2.1), that appears in the three films. That *princess* is only used in a negative manner in the sea amongst merfolk, as well as used only by the villain, it may be interpreted as a wish to disassociate with linguistic sexism, such as female marking of words, as they do by not using the generic *he* in (5).

While there is a generic masculine in the human world, there is rather a generic feminine in the world of merfolk in the films. Quantitatively, *man* appears more than twice as often as *woman* in the films, adding to the assumption that there is a generic *man/he* in the human world since it appears more often through generic purposes. Every verbally expressed instance of *man* was counted including expressions like *hey man*, *geez man*, as well as compounds such as *weatherman* and the plural form. The *man* included in *merman* was not included in this calculation but separately. In the same movies, the word *mermaid* occurs more often than *merman*, indicating a feminine generic as seen in table 1.

Table. 1. Occurrence of words in the films

Occurrence of words in the dialogue of the films				
	Splash	The Little Mermaid	Aquamarine	Total:
Merfolk/Merpeople/Fish folk:	0	5	0	5
Mermaid:	16	5	15	36
Merman:	0	2	1	3
Woman:	6	2	1	9
Man:	12	5	5	22
Human (being):	2	23	2	27
Fishman:	2	0	0	2

The word *man* then appears 22 times whereas *woman* appears only nine times in total, indicating that the generic *man* is systematically used in English besides referring to specific men. Examples of these are seen above in (1), (2) and later in (17). The words *boy* and *girl* were counted as well with the result that *girl* was the most frequently occurring word, which might be explained by the high rate of female characters in the films. However, these results cannot be representative for the human world since the word *girl* applies to mermaids as well, both with and without the tail. Ursula and Ariel even refer to themselves as *girls*. In the same manner *boy* is complicated since it also includes the dog Max and the eels, revealing that these words are not limited to humans only but rather indicating gender and human traits.

The word *mermaid* is mentioned 36 times in conversation whereas *merman* is mentioned three times in total (see table 1). However, in *Aquamarine* the merman in question is in fact mentioned three times, but referred to with invectives the two second times:

- (6) *He's mad at me because I swam away from home three days before I'm supposed to get married off to this merman who is about as deep as a tidal pool* (*Aquamarine*, 2006: 0:19:07).
- (7) *I don't want to marry some spoiled, rich squid* (*Aquamarine*, 2006:0:23:50).
- (8) *Or else I'll be swimming down the aisle with that... blowfish!* (*Aquamarine*, 2006:0:24:45).

The merman that *Aquamarine* is supposed to marry is only referred to once as a merman then referred to negatively as a *squid* and a *blowfish*: a common way to insult someone even amongst humans is to use animal terms (see section 2.2). In the same manner, her father is also a merman but is only referred to as *he*, *father* or *dad* throughout the movie since it is *Aquamarine* who narrates the stories from under the

sea. These indirect references to mermen lowers the number of instances of the word *merman* that is likely to appear in the film.

In *Splash* there are no instances of the word *merman* but Alan is called *fishman* by the media when they find out that he dated the mermaid. The word may indicate a demeaning way of saying *merman*, since they tested him in water to see if he would change too, but may equally indicate someone who is in love with a "fish". In *The Little Mermaid* it is Triton who mentions the word *merman*, once about himself and once when he wonders who the lucky merman is whom Ariel has fallen in love with.

However, in the same manner there are several words that indirectly refer to mermaids, demonstrating that in spite of the hidden mermen behind words such as *blowfish* or *father*, there is still a higher rate of the word mermaid, even indirectly:

- (9) *Keep in touch, fishbutt!* (Aquamarine, 2006:0:43:30).
- (10) *You know what, Hailey? It's good to have friends with fins!* (Aquamarine, 2006:1:30:10).
- (11) *He still chooses her over me? But she's a fish!* (Aquamarine, 2006:1:24:36).
- (12) *We marry who our parents pick* (Aquamarine, 2006:0:24:32).
- (13) *I guess they thought you might be one* (Splash, 1984:1:18:35).
- (14) *Oh, I'm sorry. That's how we eat lobster where I come from* (Splash, 1984:1:04:30).
- (15) *You never saw a guy who slept with a fish before?* (Splash, 1984:1:20:57).
- (16) *All my life I've been waiting for someone and when I find her she's a fish* (Splash, 1984:1:21:53).

In *Aquamarine* her friends cheerfully talk of mermaids, specifically the mermaid Aquamarine, in a friendly and a jocular manner as seen in (9) and (10). After sharing their emotional goodbyes, knowing that all three of them will go separate ways, Hailey relieves the atmosphere by saying (9): showing her care for their relationship with a sense of a humour. In (10) Claire expresses that it is beneficial knowing a mermaid since they have a wish yet to be granted. In contrast, when mermaids are discussed negatively the derogatory word *fish* appears in all three films, for example by Alan's brother in (15) but also by himself in (16) in *Splash*, reducing them to their animal half. Cecilia uses it in (11) in anger when Raymond chooses the mermaid over her in *Aquamarine* and in *The Little Mermaid* Ursula bitterly exclaims *he and his flimsy fish folk* (see table 1). Even though Hailey uses the word *fish* as well, in (9), she only refers to her tail, assumingly not intending to degrade her to an animal since she is her friend.

When the mermaids refer to their own race they use pronouns such as *we* and *our* which Aquamarine and Madison do in (12) and (14). Also, when they test to see if Alan will change in water, (13) is expressed by Madison where *one* refers to merfolk.

However, the high rate of *mermaid* instead of *merman* might be due to the fact that the merfolk characters in the movies are mainly female. Even so, the Oxford dictionary (2010:963) demonstrates that mermaids are more common than mermen. The definitions for *mermaid* and *merman* are almost identical, except for the gender, but the definition for *merman* ends with "...like a male mermaid". This implies strongly that the male version of the species is being compared to the female as opposed to humans where the female has always been compared to the male (see section 2.2.1). Hence, within the species of merfolk the feminine is the prototype.

Table 2. *Mermaid and Merman in different languages.*

Language	Mermaid	Merman
Arabic:	البحر حورية	الماء غراذق
Bulgarian:	<i>Русалка</i>	<i>Океанид</i>
Catalan:	<i>Sirena</i>	<i>Sirènid</i>
Chinese:	美人鱼	人鱼
Czech:	<i>Mořská panna</i>	
Danish:	<i>Havfrue</i>	<i>Havmand</i>
Dutch:	<i>Zeemermin</i>	<i>Meerman</i>
Estonian:	<i>Merineitsi</i>	
Finnish:	<i>Merenneito</i>	<i>Vetehinen</i>
French:	<i>Siréne</i>	
German:	<i>Meerjungfrau</i>	
Greek:	<i>Γοργόνα</i>	<i>Θαλασσάνθρωπος</i>
Hebrew:	הים בתולת	
Hungarian:	<i>Sellő</i>	<i>Sellő</i>
Indonesian:	<i>Putri duyung</i>	<i>Puteri duyung</i>
Italian:	<i>Sirena</i>	
Japanese:	マーメイド	半魚人

Korean:	인어공주	맨처음
Latvian:	<i>Nāriņa</i>	<i>Ūdensvīrs</i>
Lithuanian:	<i>Undinė</i>	
Norwegian:	<i>Havfrue</i>	
Polish:	<i>Syrenka</i>	
Portuguese:	<i>Sereia</i>	
Romanian:	<i>Sirena</i>	
Russian:	<i>Русалка</i>	<i>Мерман</i>
Slovak:	<i>Morská panna</i>	<i>Morský</i>
Slovenian:	<i>Morska deklica</i>	
Spanish:	<i>Sirena</i>	<i>Tritón</i>
Swedish:	<i>Sjöjungfru</i>	
Thai:	เมธัสเมต	
Turkish:	<i>Deniz kızı</i>	<i>Deniz civanı</i>
Ukrainian:	<i>Русалка</i>	<i>Мерман</i>
Vietnamese:	<i>Nàng tiên cá</i>	
Source: Collinsdictionary.com (2013)		

The minority of the word *merman* is shown throughout other languages as well as seen in table 2. In the languages presented by Collins Dictionary (2013) every language had a word for *mermaid*, all thirty-three of them, whereas only eighteen of the languages had a word for *merman*, which is a little more than half.

Since films mainly use pictorial narration, it may also be of relevance to notice the pictorial merfolk that appear in the background (see section 2.6). Merfolk items that appear in the human world are for instance a statue and a necklace which are of importance to the plot. Of the four items picturing merfolk three of them are mermaids and only one is a merman (see table 3), reinforcing the mermaid as the prototype of merfolk, which is seen as a generic in language.

Table 3. Pictorial merfolk in the movies

Movies:	Mermaid object:	Merman object:	Time:
Splash	Statue		0:52:41
The Little Mermaid	Decoration on ship		1:02:55
Aquamarine	Weather vane	Necklace charm	0:09:30 and 0:28:36

The most important and influential characteristic of the generic *man* is its ability to represent the whole human race, such as *mankind* (see section 2.1). In the movies, there are at least three instances of the mermaid representing the whole race of merfolk:

(17) A: *Yeah. Mermaids speak every language known to man, fish, crustacean and several varieties of sea fowl. What can you speak?*

B: *I got a C in Spanish...* (Aquamarine, 2006:0:17:10).

(8) A: *Oh, you know. If you help a mermaid, you get a wish...*

B: *I thought that was genies?* (Aquamarine, 2006:026:46).

(19) *He's a human, you're a mermaid!* (The Little Mermaid, 1989:0:33:58).

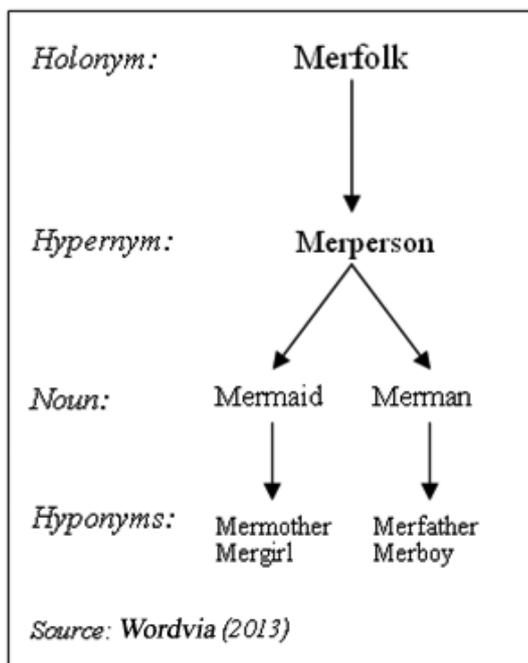
In the two pieces of dialogue in (17) and (18), Aquamarine uses the mermaid as a representative for the whole race. Assumably all merfolk, including the mermen, speak all the mentioned languages and may grant wishes, not only the female subjects of the species. The mermaid as generic is also positioned next to other races such as the generic *man* for humans, the fairy tale creature *genies*, and different species of animals connected to water, as if an equal and parallel race.

In *The Little Mermaid* however, there is a generic mermaid put in a non-parallel structure in (19). There is no gender in *human* as in *mermaid* which makes it non-parallel and for the same reason *human*

is also more inclusive than *mermaid* (see section 2.2). A parallel structure would read *man - mermaid* or *human - merfolk*. Nonetheless, the mermaid is positioned as the equivalent of the human race which makes it generic.

As seen in table 4 *mermaid* and *merman* are subcategories to *merperson* which is a hypernym and more general: every member of the merfolk species is a merperson, but not everyone is a merman. In human terms, *woman* and *man* are subcategories to *person*, but yet, when discussing everyone or someone of unknown gender, the masculine *man* is used even though it belongs to a subcategory. Similarly when it comes to merfolk, the feminine *mermaid* is used as a representative. *The Little Mermaid* is the only movie to use the holonym; *merfolk*, and its variations of *merpeople* used by humans and *fishfolk* used by the villain to a total of five times (see table 1). *Mermaid* is mentioned equally many times in the same movie, indicating matching importance to the holonym. However, concerning humanity, the holonym *human* is used heavily in comparison to *man* which only appears five times (see table 1), implying that there is a stronger generic mermaid than there is a generic man in the film.

Table 4. *Hierarchy of the word “Mermaid”*



However, the generic mermaid is likely to be a product of human values such as the sexualised female subject, since it historically were male sailors who travelled the waters and were allowed to fantasize about the mysteries at sea, which resulted in a seductive available maid of the sea (see section 3.1). The feminine generic is hence not as strong as the masculine generic in the human world, since it is limited to its sexualised identity as attractive and seductive, a creation sprung from the lust of men. Today, however, the popularity of mermaids is increasing according to Peterson (see section 2.6), and they

appeal to both women and men, not only as a subject of lust. In the end, neither a masculine or feminine generic is desirable in order to gain equality between the sexes.

3.3 The Human Ideals for Women and Men

When the mermaids get legs and walk up on shore they are met with human ideals that are different from their own, such as being referred to as *miss* (see section 3.1). The way they express themselves and behave clearly shows that they are not initially from the human world or part of that culture. However, since the manuscripts for the films are written in English, some of the human values are hidden within the speech of the mermaids in spite of attempts to change it. These aspects are discussed in the following sections:

3.3.1 Fishified Language, Same Values

The two most recent movies which are directed to children and teenagers have something in common concerning the language that *Splash* lacks: the language used in the ocean and by mermaids is "fishified". In other words, English expressions have got an aquatic twist. In *The Little Mermaid* the squid-like Ursula says *take matters into my own tentacles* and in order to convince Ariel Sebastian says *the seaweed is always greener in somebody else's lake*. We can easily translate *tentacles* into *hands* and *seaweed* into *grass*, as they usually go. This gives the opportunity of making the language funnier and friendlier for a young audience, for example enabling and softening swearing such as when the mermaid Aquamarine exclaims *bullshark* or *crabs!*

(20) *Flounder, you really are a guppy!* (The Little Mermaid, 1989:0:08:14).

(21) *You're just the crab to do it!* (The Little Mermaid, 1989:0:13:22).

(22) A: *Cecilia told him Aqua had a boyfriend!*

B: *That, that... barnacle!* 0:57:52 (Aquamarine, 2006:0:57:52).

However, despite the aquatic transformation, it is still English and carries the same values. (20) is expressed when Ariel and Flounder are out exploring sunken ships Flounder gets scared. The context as well as the meaning of *guppy* as a small, freshwater fish which is commonly kept in safe aquariums (OALD, 2010:693), fuels the idea that she might refer to him as a *sissy*. According to Hall the word *sissy* is an insult for boys who are weak, afraid and who like things that girls like, a definition which fits the image of a small fish that rather stays in its safe aquarium than exploring the big blue (see section 2.3). The word *sissy* as an insult is a result of the process amongst boys in which they have to prove their masculinity by not being feminine according to Hall (2008) (see section 2.3). However, in this

context it is rather a female who teases a male for not being masculine enough. With regard to the fact that this is a Disney movie, it is not surprising that Flounder's behaviour is made fun of, according to Putnam (2013) it is very common for the Disney villains to have traits which are typical for the opposite sex, in order to promote the heterosexuality of the heroes and heroines (see section 2.6.2).

In the same movie, Triton gives Sebastian the task to look out for Ariel in (21). This is very similar to expressions like "you're the man for the job", revealing a hidden generic *man* behind *crab*, which has just been adapted to an underwater environment.

In *Aquamarine* one of the human girls calls Cecilia a *royal bitch*, whereas the swearing of the mermaid is more child-friendly since it is made up on aquatic associations as seen above in *bullshark*. At one point Cecilia is mean to the mermaid as well, causing her to exclaim (22): *That, that... Barnacle!* The fact that she is speaking about the same girl who was called *bitch* earlier by someone else, and that it begins with *b*, direct the thoughts from *barnacle* to the similar *bitch*. It is an offensive expression towards unpleasant women (OALD, 2010:141), which originally meant to describe promiscuous women acting as a dog in heat (see section 2.2). A barnacle is a shell that attaches itself to objects underwater and *Aquamarine* calls Cecilia *barnacle* shortly after finding out that she had been all over Raymond, whom *Aquamarine* likes (OALD, 2010:108). Offensive words for women and men carrying ideals of how they should and should not be are simply translated through aquatic associations in the way the merfolk speak. This is seen in the two most recent movies and might be due to their young audience whom they want to be able to recognize what they say in order to find it humorous. This is, according to Wells (2013) (see section 2.6), the standard model in scriptwriting: choosing from the vernacular vocabulary in order to make the plot seem believable to the audience in spite of being artificial.

In *The Little Mermaid* there is surprisingly no aquatic filter to prettify the swearing, despite of its genre as a children's movie, when Ursula calls Ariel a *tramp* as she almost succeeds in being kissed. *Tramp* means either a homeless person or, offensively for a woman, someone who has had many sexual partners (OALD, 2010:1644). Ariel has only had legs for two days and was simply close to kissing someone whom she believes is her true love, which makes *tramp* very unfitting for Ariel whom is still a virgin and only interested in one man. But as with the feminine titles, women are often categorised by their sexual relations while all men go under the neutral *mr* (see section 2.2.1). Words for women with sexual connotations are very common and often negative, whereas the male equivalents are either rare or seldom used, which creates a judgmental non-parallel structure (see section 2.2). Swear words such as *bitch* or *tramp* come from a whole vocabulary of words condemning women's sexuality whereas there are only few, though positive, words for men. As in language it is also very common in fairy tales: the heroine should be pure and unsexed, values that shine through from the religious tradition in which they originate (see section 2.4), and which has lived on through the modern media such as movies (see

section 2.6). It is only Madison in *Splash* who has a sexual relationship of the three mermaids because it is a movie for adults, none of the sexual activities is shown however since it is also PG-rated. The press even asks Alan, knowing that she is a mermaid, if they are forced to have sex underwater. The issue of sex is easily discussed in this movie and she is not condemned for it with swear words in the same way like in the other movies which are directed to young girls, mediating to girls that it is rewarding to wait with sex. However, when Madison takes a bath with her tail in the middle of the night and Alan wonders what is going on and why he cannot come in, she blames it on being shy. He cannot accept this, after having sex with her in the car, the elevator, in the bedroom and on top of the refrigerator, she could not possibly be shy all of a sudden. In other words, she seems to have lost her right to deny him sex since she has agreed to sex several times already.

3.3.2 Linguistic Misinterpretation of Human Culture

Even if the mermaids are superior when it comes to language, as we are told by Aquamarine and shown by Madison who learns English by just watching television for one day, they make linguistic errors. Not necessarily syntactical mistakes, but revealing different values and misinterpreting the ideals of humans. The most evident occurrence is when Ariel in *The Little Mermaid* was taught by a seagull that a fork is called a *dingle hopper* and a pipe is a musical instrument called *snarfblatt*, which gives quite some stares at the dinner table. In *Splash* Alan understands that Madison is different since she was completely quiet until she learnt English from television, which caused her to repeat commercial slogans. When she accidentally says *remember* about one of Alan's childhood memories which involved a mermaid, her at a young age, she makes use of her seemingly linguistic insecurity and claims that she forgot the words and meant *understand*.

According to studies of fairy tales it is very common to describe girls according to their appearance and goodness while boys are described according to their size and mental skills (see section 2.4). This is seen throughout the three movies, the modern fairy tales, where the girls are described by others as *sweet, little, pretty, caring, hot, scared, beautiful, smart, courageous, sensitive, gorgeous* and *bright*, and the boys are described as *great, big, handsome, old, hot, scary, fat* and *crazy*. However, the mermaids break these unwritten linguistic rules:

(23) *He's so beautiful* (The Little Mermaid, 1989:0:24:03).

(24) A: *Wow, you look pretty.*

B: *So do you!*

A: *(Laughs) Thank you. So what do you say we grab something to eat?*

B: *Yes! I'm good at that!*

A: (*Laughs*) *Okay* (Aquamarine, 2006:1:00:26).

In *The Little Mermaid* when Ariel has saved Eric and stays by his side, she calls him *beautiful* as in (23), an epithet usually ascribed to women. Similarly, Aquamarine responds with *so do you* in (24) when she is called *pretty*. Since men are not often referred to as *pretty*, Raymond laughs. He then asks if they should eat and Aquamarine exclaims in relief *I'm good at that!* which is also met by laughter. This might have happened due to nervousness, but the mistake she makes is to take pride in something one usually does not when it comes to girls since appearance is of importance: the ideal is to be thin which requires moderateness in eating. Cecilia manifests this ideal by remarking that one of her friends put away a lot of sausages at the street fair, and the stares that Madison receives when she eats a lobster with her hands.

3.3.3 Learn how to become a woman

In *The Little Mermaid*, both worlds presented are patriarchies according to Giroux, since both land and sea are ruled by men (see section 2.6.2). The true patriarch himself is king Triton, the "great father" who named all of his daughters and who forbids them to visit the surface. In her singing, Ariel reveals that she hopes that humans are different, not reprimanding their daughters and that they will know better. However, prince Eric tries to give Ariel the kiss of true love shortly after meeting her and without her having said one word to him. One morning, the seagull comes to deliver the news to Ariel that the prince is going to get married, congratulating her. Ariel did not know and was happy to hear about it, in other words, it is acceptable for him to arrange a marriage for them without having asked her first.

In all three movies it is obvious that the mermaid has got legs to visit land to find love; Madison met Alan as a child and is determined to find him again, Ariel wants to marry prince Eric and Aquamarine has to prove that love exists. In the two most recent movies the motives are clearer; the animated feature *The Little Mermaid* naturally allows more footage underwater which then explains the background of the situation and in Aquamarine she needs her two friends to help her, and by explaining to them, she explains it to the viewer. Madison only has Alan to talk to, to whom she is quite secretive about her true form and why she is on land. However, in the two movies where the motives are clear we find out that Ariel was not allowed to visit the surface due to her father, the king. Aquamarine also explains that she needs to prove to her father that love exists or her parents will marry her off to a merman she disapproves of. She gets three days to prove herself, and when she falls into the water her father manipulates the currents to pull her back home. He also has the power to create storms in the movie, which aligns with the old sayings about mermen (see section 2.5). Conclusively, two out of three movies indicate that the world under the sea is a patriarchy as well as the world on land.

When entering the patriarchal land, there are some expectations of how women should be which they have to learn or otherwise clash with. One of the ideals for women is that silence is a virtue, which is common in literature and fairy tales all over the world (see section 2.3). This is seen throughout the movies, for example when Ursula tries to convince Ariel:

(25) *The men up there don't like a lot of blabber, they think a girl who gossips is a bore! Yet on land it's much preferred for ladies not to say a word, and after all dear, what is idle babble for? Come on, they're not all that impressed with conversation, true gentlemen avoid it when they can. But they dote and swoon and fawn on a lady who's withdrawn. It's she who holds her tongue who gets her man* (The Little Mermaid, 1989:0:41:23).

Being the villain, Ursula may very well represent unwanted values when she depicts women's speech as something highly negative. However, she is proven right when Eric tries to bestow the kiss of true love on Ariel without her having said a word (see section 2.6.2). Of course, when he hears her voice again he is certain of his love for her, but he would have married her with or without voice.

In the human world of *Aquamarine*, Hailey's mother asks her to elaborate on her answers. When she responds with something she does not want to hear, she says *maybe we should go back to fewer syllables*. In other words, if Hailey does not say what her mother wants her to, she'd rather encourage her to be silent. However, both Hailey, Claire and Raymond are impressed with the mermaid's self-esteem and how she can be so sure of herself as opposed to the two girls in the film. She breaks the human ideal of silent women when she, for example, screams out *hello* in a large mall, startling her two friends since it is against the norm. It is quite contradictory that the ideal of silent women penetrates the human society in *Aquamarine* but when one woman appears to be different it is even welcomed:

(26) A: *Are you always so sure of everything?*

B: *Yes.*

A: *More people should be like that.*

B: *Some of us are only human* (*Aquamarine*, 2006:1:00:26).

(27) *Stop shrieking like a couple of gulls. For shrimps you're awfully loud* (*Aquamarine*, 2006:1:00:26).

In (26) it is also revealed that even *Aquamarine* thinks of humans as insecure, as opposed to mermaids. This insecurity is not surprising as a result of a society with ideals such as the silent woman and non-feminine man, which excludes a lot of people (see section 2.3). In (27), the mermaid yells at the two girls to be quiet when she meets them for the first time and they keep screaming due to fear of the

"fictional" creature in front of them. It appears that even the mermaid thinks that human girls ought to be quieter, which is the ideal, even that they are beneath her calling them *shrimps*.

In *Splash*, Alan asks the mermaid what her name is and she says that it is difficult to express in English. She attempts to say it in her own language, which sounds like the yelling of seagulls and dolphins and which causes the glass of the televisions to break and the people to cover their ears. The language of mermaids is not welcome in *Splash*, and she has to adapt to the language of men.

In order to learn how to be women in the human world they have to be taught by people around them. According to Sells, Ursula teaches Ariel that instead of her voice she should use body language and to make use of the artifices and trappings that exist in gendered behaviour, which is shown when she plays helpless in order to make Eric help her, as interpreted by Sells (1995) (see section 2.6.2). In the same manner, the crab Sebastian tries to teach Ariel how to seduce Eric without a voice, but with her female body:

(28) *Tomorrow when he takes you for that ride, you gotta look your best. You gotta bat your eyes like this, you gotta pucker up your lips, like this* (Aquamarine, 2006:1:00:26).

(29) *You have to be flirty but demure. Devoted, but not desperate. Available but elusive. And if he calls on Wednesday for Saturday you have to be busy, even though you're free?* (Aquamarine, 2006:0:35:04).

In *Aquamarine*, her friends teach her all about "boy-bagging technology" with the help of dozens of magazines. Aquamarine sums them up in (29) with the result that there is a lot of pressure on human girls when it comes to dating, they have to be spark the boy's interest without giving away the goods, which derives from the idea of keeping girls unsexed (see section 2.4). In the street fair the girls instruct Aquamarine on what to do: *twirl your hair, arch your back, pucker your lips*, in order to gain Raymond's interest and make him come to her. Both Hailey, Claire and Ursula teach the mermaids how to "perform woman" and use body language (see section 2.6.2).

In *Splash* there are no female friends around to help Madison, but she has been left alone with a television which strongly promotes ideal for men and women. As a mermaid she does not own clothes beforehand and has only been lent a t-shirt. While watching a commercial for Bloomingdale's she looks at her own clothes in disappointment and realises that she must dress differently to appeal to Alan. She finds Alan's credit card, dresses in his clothes and visits the store. A store keeper who finds her male clothes dreadful helps her to shop, and while discussing a dress of a small size the store keeper says that her daughter is lucky because she is anorexic. The ideal for women here is extremely focused on appearance: to be thin and beautiful in order to gain a man.

According to Sells this process is part of the mermaids' entry into the white male system. Those who are inside the white male system and live in the dominant culture, "the real world", are unaware of the muted and marginalized cultures outside (see section 2.6.2). This is a major plot device in the film since humans are oblivious of the other worlds and dismiss it as mere fairy tales, such as Grimsby who calls it *nautical nonsense*, or Eric who believes that he was saved from drowning by not a mermaid but a human girl. This unawareness is shown by Hailey's mother in *Aquamarine* who is a marine biologist: she cleaned the water in the bay and expects no response about the results since only the fish can know for sure. However, Aquamarine, a mermaid, actually asks Hailey to thank her since it tastes a lot better now, something she never would have expected to hear.

(30) *Fabled marine creature, half woman half fish... best known for sitting on rocks, staring into mirrors, obsessively combing our long beautiful hair... blah blah blah* (*Aquamarine*, 2006:0:16:47).

(31) A: *She's a fictional sea creature. They could be bad.*

B: *We are not fictional! We're discreet* (*Aquamarine*, 2006:0:17:29).

In (30) *Aquamarine* presents mermaids very similarly to the way Briggs described them in section 2.5, however with a tone of irony since it is followed by *blah blah*, indicating that she is tired of the stereotypes that have been made of her people. The white male system is often oblivious to the marginalized cultures outside, reducing them to stereotypes as seen in the sea creatures in *The Little Mermaid* and which are difficult to change (see section 2.6.2). Even though she has made herself present to the humans they are still oblivious: Claire insists on calling her *fictional* in (31), non-existent, which causes justifiable frustration for *Aquamarine*.

In *Splash* the entering of the mermaid into the white male system is perceived by Alan as an immigration problem that he can fix by giving her a job at his company or marrying her. As in *The Little Mermaid*, the creatures of the sea are safe at home but are endangered in the human world in which they might be reduced to food (see section 2.6.2). When she is on land with the appearance of a human being she is safe, but the moment her tail is revealed she becomes an object for the press and for science. The next step is to investigate her internal organs, without her consent, which will consequently lead to her death if it is not prevented.

Entering the white male system is dangerous and comes with costs: Ariel had to give up her voice in order to gain mobility with legs. According to Sells (1995) women cannot have both mobility and voice in the white male system, they need to sacrifice their femininity in order to be successful, giving Geraldine Ferraro as an example who lost votes due to her masculine voice (see section 2.6.2). Not to mention Margaret Thatcher who had to lower her pitch in order to be listened to as prime minister

according to Graddol and Swann (1989) (see section 2.3). Ariel loses her voice originally and so does Madison when she loses her own language and has to be renamed with a human name. All of them leave a huge piece of themselves behind, their tails, homes and families, when they enter the human world. As Aquamarine is told by her friends in (32):

(32) A: *Just be yourself.*

B: *Minus the tail!* (Aquamarine, 2006:0:59:59).

For a mermaid, it must be quite difficult to be herself without her tail and everything that goes with it: her language, behaviour etcetera that all clash with the human world.

4. Conclusion

The purpose of the present study is to investigate linguistic sexism involving the mermaid in conversation in three films: *Splash* from 1984, *The Little Mermaid* from 1989 and *Aquamarine* from 2006. More specifically the aspects of non-parallel structure, the generic man and expressed ideals for men and women. In conclusion, the labelling of merfolk has non-parallel structure inherited in them since *mermaid* and *merman* are asymmetrical. The word *mermaid* contains the word *maid* which adds a sexual element to the feminine word that does not exist in the male equivalent. *Maid* refers to an unmarried, virgin female, much like the titles used for addressing humans which categorise women sexually: *miss*, *mrs* and the neutral *mr* for men. This phenomenon is seen in other languages as well, for example German and Swedish. Even though mermaids do not use these addressing titles themselves both Ariel and Madison become subjects of the usage of *miss* when addressed ashore.

On land there is also a generic masculine which is seen by the high rate of the word *man* as opposed to *woman* throughout the three films, and that *man/he* is used in professions, proverbs and when discussing someone of unknown gender. However, amongst merfolk there is a generic feminine in the three films. The word *mermaid* is mentioned more frequently than *merman* in every film and it is positioned as a representative of the whole race when put next to the other races of *humans*, *man*, *genies*, *sea fowl* and *crustacean*. Also, while singing in the sea in *The Little Mermaid*, they use both *he* and *she* instead of just the generic *he*. When looking closer at other languages as well as the dictionary, it is clear that the mermaid is the prototype and that the merman is more likely to be compared to the mermaid. This is the opposite of the human world in which the female always have been compared to the male. The pictorial narrating in the movies also show mermaids more frequently than they do mermen. However, no generic at all would be preferable in gaining equality between the sexes. The feminine generic amongst mermaids is also rendered weaker with its sexual connotations which the generic man is not limited to.

The human ideals such as "silence is a virtue for women" and that men are not allowed to resemble women in behaviour, pitch, interests etcetera is something that the mermaids are confronted with and are being taught, such as Ursula in *The Little Mermaid*, Hailey and Claire in *Aquamarine* and the television in *Splash*. They teach the mermaid how to act, dress and behave as a woman in the human world in order to fit in and gain a man's interest. In spite of this they clash with the culture in the way they behave but also linguistically since they say things that conflict with the values on land. In the two most recent films, *Aquamarine* and *The Little Mermaid*, which are directed to a younger audience than *Splash*, the language that the mermaids use is "fishified". However, the aquatic expressions are based on English human sayings revealing that they carry the same values. For example referring to girly boys as *sissies* and using words for girls that condemn their promiscuity. The mermaids appear to be unaccustomed to these ideals in the human world when their languages and expressions actually convey the same attitudes and ideals. In the end, the concept of mermaids are based on human imagination and human language, and cannot be unaffected by human values.

According to research fairy tales help children discover the world, their place in it and how to perceive it and the fact that these stories are today retold by the media of movies, it is of importance that they are retold in a more appropriate way in order to counter social values and norms that should not be supported. By using sexist language we unfortunately promote sexist stereotypes in society which are harmful and greatly affect the children's behavioural patterns and their concept of what is rewarding and punishing for each gender. Since it is difficult to affect what authors and filmmakers write, and unfortunate to take the stories away from the children, it is better to follow the advice of Giroux: as parents and pedagogues teach children how to reflect and being critical of what they see, not only of mermaid stories even though it is gaining popularity, but with all types of storytelling.

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