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Language Styles Used by the Main Characters in the Movie *Cruella* (2021)

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the language styles used by the main characters, Cruella (Estella) and Baroness, in the *Cruella* movie (2021). The language use of the two main characters is studied because their socioeconomic classes differ, which leads to variances in language styles. Using a qualitative descriptive method, this study analyzes the language styles and communication components that influence the movie *Cruella*. Joos' theory is used to analyze the types of language styles, whilst Hymes' "SPEAKING" model is used to analyze communication component. The data collection technique used is the uninvolved conversation observation (*simak bebas cakap*) to understand the use of language styles directly. According to the study's findings, there are 65 language styles: 26 casual style, 22 consultative style, 13 formal style, and 4 intimate style. The use of these language styles is heavily influenced by communication components such as setting, participants, and conversation goals. The results show that casual style dominates the conversation, suggesting that language is more than just a communication tool; it is also a political and psychological domain where identities are at stake.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The film industry, as a visual art form that reflects and develops global culture, plays a significant role in introducing ideologies and social norms into society (Hall, 1980, as cited in Kriswanto, 2019). It has a unique ability to lead audiences into fantasy realms, often blurring the line between fiction and reality. Movies, through a combination of visual story-telling, cinematography, and acting, allow audiences to feel tension, empathy, or even discomfort as if they are a part of the narrative themselves (Bordwell et al., 2024).

The immersion becomes even stronger when the scenes include severe interpersonal or societal dynamics, such as verbal or physical violence. This perspective aligns with Widodo (2022), who argues that the informants' reactions to the scenes vary depending on the situation and environment that set the scenes, which include various forms of physical and verbal violence. As a result, film becomes a type of social commentary, encouraging audiences to consider their own ideals and social experiences.

Movies are not simply entertainment, but also an effective tool for changing social perceptions by the way they convey their stories. This demonstrates how the media, especially movie, serves as a medium that influences how we interpret the world and the power dynamics within it (McLuhan, 1964, as cited in Tarzia, 2025).

Many movies use language to illustrate power dynamics between characters. The formality and variety of language used by the characters represent their social status, control, and dominance (Holmes & Wilson, 2017). Characters of high social status, for example, tend to use more formal and structured language, whilst those from lower social levels use more relaxed and informal language. These distinctions are not only about word choice; they also represent real-world social hierarchy and power dynamics.

Furthermore, this sign of power can be found in antagonist-protagonist interactions. In movies, antagonists may confront the protagonist using both formal and casual language. However, the tone will be harsh and manipulative as it becomes a psychological approach to defeat the protagonist. This serves not only to show their supremacy, but also to point out that language is more than just a tool of communication; it can also be used to assert authority and power. As a result, studying antagonists is more engaging.

The movie *Maleficent* (2014) is the first time Disney have used antagonists as main characters. In this movie, Disney alters people's perceptions of a formerly vile character by narrating an entirely new story that explains the origins of this horrible behavior. Here, language is used to convey the character's depth, showing how pain and betrayal can influence behavior. This indicates that language is made up not only by social interactions but also by emotional experiences.

In addition, Craig Gillespie's movie *Cruella* (2021) provides another example of how language is used to express and show power disparities. In this movie, language style, identity, dominance, and resistance do not exist as standalone factors, but rather represent a complex narrative and symbolic network that reinforces one another. Through its main character, Estella, who later transforms into Cruella, this movie not only tells the story of a character's personal transformation, but also presents a vivid picture of how language reflects identity, and how identity becomes a battlefield for dominance and resistance in society.

The movie begins with Estella trying to "fit in" with social norms. She speaks in a courteous, measured, and deliberate tone, demonstrating her wish to be accepted by the world. This represents her subaltern position: she is at the bottom, both economically and socially, and her language style is a type of adaptation to "survive". However, as the story

unfolds, her language becomes harsher, caustic, and even dramatic. This shift in language style parallels her identity transition from Estella to Cruella.

When Estella transforms into Cruella, she adopts a new character that is completely different from her previous one. She actively confronts and disrupts the status quo, even if it means embarrassing the Baroness. She is no longer attempting to fit and is openly rebellious. Furthermore, in order to express her existence and strength, she takes the spot once reserved for individuals who “don’t fit in.”

This is the process of developing identity through language. Cruella is more than just a new name; it is an identity performance based on body language, intonation, word choice, and outfit aesthetics. In this movie, identity is dynamic and performative since it is created, negotiated, and maintained by social acts, including language. This makes language style a tool for claiming territory. Cruella causes chaos through language and looks, resulting in a breathtaking and intimidating remarks. She uses language not simply to communicate but also to oppose, provoke, and alter power dynamics.

However, the movie's major issue is the tension between dominance and resistance, as portrayed by Cruella and the Baroness's relationship. The Baroness symbolizes aristocratic dominance: she speaks in a formal, firm, and judgmental tone. Her language is the power language, which is used to control, command, and belittle others. Cruella, on the other hand, opposes such dominance not just by her deeds but also with her speech. When she responds to Baroness's sarcasm with high-pitched taunts and creative language, a verbal fight ensues—whoever dominates the discourse wields power.

Additionally, this movie suggests that effective resistance entails not only reversing power dynamics, but also creating alternative narratives. Cruella does not want to be a second Baroness, so she develops her own system in which “excessive” styles, expressions, and language become sources of power. This is where power is challenged and formerly marginalized identities are brought to the surface. Cruella's flamboyant and dramatic language represents that resistance—that being unique is not a weakness, but rather a strength.

Finally, *Cruella* argues that language is more than just a tool of for communication; it is a political and psychological domain in which identities are at stake and authority is questioned. Identity, in this story, is produced via resistance and rejection of the standard norms. In addition, resistance is about developing new languages. It is a new ways of saying and being that break free from the old order. Cruella is more than just being “evil” or “different,” it is about speaking up in a language that the old powers can no longer control.

2. METHODS

This study is a qualitative research that uses the descriptive analysis method. The uninvolved conversation observation approach is applied in this study to analyze the movie *Cruella* (2021). Aside from the movie itself, secondary data such as the book *The Five Clocks*, sociolinguistic books (Chaer & Agustina, 2010; Hymes, 2013; Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2021), and past research publications on language styles (Diani et al., 2021; Salsabila & Permanasari, 2022) are used to analyze this movie. The fundamental thesis in this study is that, communication components influence the language styles used by the main characters in the movie *Cruella* (2021), as seen through the lens of Joos' language styles theory and Hymes' “SPEAKING” model. According to Joos (1967, as cited in Chaer and Agustina, 2010), language style is divided into five types: frozen style, formal style, casual style, consultative style, and intimate style.

1. Frozen Style

According to Joos (1967), frozen style is the most rigid and structured language style. This style is typically used in highly formal or even holy contexts, such as scriptures, official documents, national speeches, and legal documents. Because of its unchanging character, this style is unaffected by time or social interactions.

2. Formal Style

Formal style is used in formal contexts but is not as rigid as frozen style. This style is often used by people who are unfamiliar with one another or who hold different roles. In short, formal style is used when the participants who are speaking do not know one other and do not have shared knowledge.

3. Consultative Style

This style is frequently used in social settings. This style is semi-formal, which means it is formal but not overly so, as opposed to the formal and frozen styles. Because it is semi-standard, this style can be used at any time and in any setting, including school or the office. In general, people use this style when they want the other side to respond. Fillers like *uhh, I see, well, and I think* are frequently used in consultative style.

4. Casual Style

This style, similar to the consultative style, is most commonly heard in regular talks. Yet, casual style does not prioritize both politeness and well-structured grammar. Slang words, vernacular language variants, and jokes are frequently used in this style, depending on the familiarity of the people speaking. In conclusion, this style demands a relationship or familiarity among the participants.

5. Intimate Style

This is the most liberal language style and can be described as a language of affection. This language style is often used by intimate friends, lovers, and family. This is because the intimate language style is one that relies on tone than the word itself. Although it sounds similar to casual style, this style is more unique, and not everyone can use the same diction (Wardhaugh, 2021). Because of its unique nature, this style is the most comfortable to use because there are no constraints on how one expresses themselves.

In addition, this study uses of Hymes' SPEAKING model to better analyze the use of language style. Hymes (2013) argues that communication required not only grammar proficiency but also awareness of social and cultural settings. He believes that knowing and adjusting to social factors is essential for good communication. Thus, he came up with the "SPEAKING" framework, which is an acronym for eight components: setting, participants, ends, act sequence, key, instrumentalities, norms, and genre.

Setting refers to the time and place where the interaction takes place. Participants are components that refer to individuals or groups involved in communication. The components that can be analyzed are age, gender, social role, social background, and relationships between participants. Ends refer to the goal of the talks. Act sequence refers to the action order in the conversation. Key refers to the tone and the atmosphere when the conversation takes place. Instrumentalities refer to the forms of the language. Norms refers to social norms that rules the conversation. While genre refers to the type of communication, such as speech, debate, or casual conversations.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Intimate Style

Context : This conversation occurs after Estella and her mother, Catherine, are invited by the principal to discuss Estella's withdrawal. The key reason for this is that she fought back against her bullies. She is merely trying to defend herself, but her actions have made her appear like a troublemaker. (00:04:55,838 → 00:05:00,884)

(21) Estella : **I'll be less trouble from now on, Mum. I promise.**

Utterance (21) is a promise from a naughty child to her mother. The participants in this interaction are Estella and Catherine, her mother. This promise is made while they are on their way to the home of Estella's mother's "friend" and Estella herself is in an agitated state. However, she expresses great shame in her statement because her actions forced her mother to seek assistance from someone she does not even know. This is a characteristic of the casual style, which prioritizes simplicity and clarity in communication. Furthermore, while this speech is a promise, Estella's interlocutor is her mother so she does not need to express it properly.

In the phrase **I'll be less trouble from now on, Mum. I promise**, Estella frames herself as a submissive character, a child who is both emotionally and socially distressed. This occurs after a school event in which Estella, although defending herself, is recognized as a troublesome student. This line expresses her awareness of her low social standing and the obvious need to placate authority, which is represented by her mother. The weight of that judgment influences how she portrays herself linguistically.

In addition, the intimate tone she employs—marked by the contraction **I'll** (I will) and the endearing name **mum** (mother)—indicates not only closeness in the relationship, but also a noticeable imbalance in emotional and social power. Moreover, this promise lacks resistance, simply apologetic, indicating Estella's intention to reassure her mother and avoid conflict. As a result, this promise is not used to establish control, but rather to indicate obedience and a desire to belong.

Estella's utterance demonstrates how positionality and uneven power relations can alter language. Her choice of words and tone is influenced by her status as a dependent and troubled child in an adult-controlled world. Even in the intimacy of a mother-daughter relationship, the power imbalance is obvious through linguistic choices that highlight Estella's subordinate position. This confirms her status as someone with no social standing who needs to rely on emotional appeal to maintain connection. She is not fighting authority, but rather surrendering to it—her words serve as a survival strategy in an uneven environment.

3.2 Consultative Style

Context : Cruella recognizes Artie's fashion skills so she invites him to join her plan to create a controversial work of art that challenges norms with defiance and rebellion. (01:03:05,827 → 01:03:30,102)

(139) Artie : Oh, my. My, my, my. You look amazing. You certainly made a splash.

(140) Cruella : **I'm just getting started, darling. And I need help. I want to make art, Artie... and I want to make trouble. You in?**

(141) Artie : I do love trouble.

This talk takes place in the relaxed ambiance of the Second Time Around fashion store with Artie and Cruella as participants. Artie is a very fashionable man who owns the Second Time Around, which offers clothing from well-known designers. Cruella, on the other hand, is a glamorous young lady who is the Baroness' new fashion rival. These two are friends, though not as close as Cruella is to Jasper and Horace, and they share the same social status. Specifically, utterance (140) proposes collaboration between the two parties. Cruella invites Artie to create “problems” together in order to win the fashion rivalry between Cruella and Baroness.

Cruella obviously takes the lead in this conversation, asserting her power using language that combines charm and authority. When she says, **I'm just getting started, darling**, the endearing word "darling" serves two purposes: it is intimate and fun, but it also softens her authority, making her invitation both seductive and authoritative. This demonstrates her ability to manage relationships while maintaining control.

Moreover, the declaration **I want to make art, Artie... and I want to make trouble**, expresses not only her aims but also her fearlessness and determination to defy social norms. By finishing with **You in?** she explicitly draws Artie into her scheme and gains control of the discussion. This phrase sets Cruella in a position of authority, as she steers the conversation and expects cooperation. In this case, the consultative style is about mobilizing support through persuasive language rather than simply presenting information.

Specifically, this strong and defiant Cruella does not emerge from thin air. The Baroness has a significant impact on Estella during this change. The Baroness represents the authoritarian social elite, whose brutality and rigorous control force Estella to abandon her fragile, meek personality in favor of Cruella's brazen persona. This transformation is represented in Cruella's aggressive and authoritative vocabulary, which signifies Estella's recovered power and defiance to the Baroness' social structures.

As a result, Cruella's language demonstrates how power is not only exercised but also learnt and developed through social relationships. The Baroness's stern stance indirectly encourages Estella's transformation into Cruella, who then wields authority by persuasive, assertive speech. Thus, in this conversation, her confident tone and strategic use of intimate yet authoritative language represent her high social position and role as a disruptor. She epitomizes the person who drives change by controlling the conversation and inviting others to share her vision—but only on her terms. As a result, the consultative style demonstrates the dynamic interplay of language, identity, and social influence in power formation.

3.3 Casual Style

Context : Baroness, who is upset with Cruella since she is her rival, comes to Anita's workplace to question her because she is the one who constantly focuses on Cruella rather than Baroness whenever a fashion show takes place.(01:12:24,261 → 01:12:35,606)

(144) Baroness: **You'll need more than eyeliner, you plain little thing. You do, however, have an eye for a good shot.**

(145) Anita : Baroness.

(146) Baroness: Who is she? And more importantly, where is she?

(147) Anita : I don't know.

This conversation occurs at London Editorial, where Anita works, as she is applying her cosmetics. The Baroness and Anita, two ladies with distinct social statuses, are the speakers in this conversation. The Baroness has a high social status, owns her own fashion house and is much recognized. Anita, on the other hand, works as a journalist at London Editorial, has a middle-class background, and is less well known. Her name becomes popular as she consistently focuses on Cruella's looks in her articles. As a result, she becomes the Baroness' target because she does not like seeing her rival succeed.

In the utterance **You'll need more than eyeliner, you plain little thing**, the Baroness wields authority by sarcastic and biting language spoken in a casual style. The sentence begins with a dismissive slur that diminishes Anita's looks and worth—**you plain little thing**—serving to humiliate and infantilize her. This direct criticism shows the Baroness's confidence in her superiority and her willingness to use language as a weapon to assert power. Furthermore, the term **eyeliner** serves as a metaphor; it trivializes Anita's efforts to improve herself, emphasizing that superficial measures will not be sufficient to meet the Baroness's standards or rank. This strengthens their hierarchical difference.

However, Baroness swiftly changes her tone by complimenting Anita's "eye for a good shot," instilling a grudging admiration amid the abuse. This gentle complement is strategic—it softens the sharpness of the previous comment, allowing her to keep conversational control while positioning herself as magnanimous and in command. Her statements sound casual since she effortlessly makes personal judgments about another person's appearances and talents, as if they are already acquainted.

These sentences show how power can be asserted in seemingly casual speech. The Baroness's use of informal yet pointed language demonstrates how the tone and content of speech can be used to enhance social status and authority. By combining insult and praise, she not only belittles Anita but also keeps her submissive and interested, strengthening Baroness' position as the dominant character in the conversation.

3.4 Formal Style

Context : Before the Baroness' fashion show begins, the Baroness feels suspicious of Estella so she wants to interrogate her as soon as possible. (01:21:25,594 → 01:21:33,977)

(169)Baroness: **When Estella arrives, escort her to my office and hold her there.**

(170) John : Very good. Although I think you're wrong. It's not her.

This interaction in a professional setting involves two individuals: the Baroness and John. Despite the fact that they are likely the same age, they both have a superior-subordinate relationship at work. On the one hand, the Baroness is a powerful and aggressive lady, aided by her high social status and position as the head of a fashion firm. John, on the other hand, is a middle-class man who works as the Baroness' servant. He has served the Baron's family since the Baron was alive. As a result, their relationship is seen as a close one.

However, in the command, **When Estella arrives, escort her to my office and hold her there**, Baroness clearly asserts her authority and control. The formal, straightforward language indicates her high social status, as she issues an unambiguous order with no space for debate. The use of the imperative mood, such as **escort** and **hold**, indicates her authority over the situation and people around her, including John. There is no sign of familiarity or casual nuance even though the Baroness has known John for a long time.

The utterance is concise and efficient, reflecting the formal style common in hierarchical workplaces where power and position control the communication. Baroness' rhetoric portrays her as a figure of surveillance and enforcement, imposing power over Estella even before meeting her. This proactive command demonstrates the Baroness's distrust and desire for control, emphasizing her status as a social order enforcer and crucial opponent.

As a result, this utterance shows how language serves as an instrument of power in formal environments. The Baroness's use of clear imperatives and the absence of courtesy cues highlight her high social status and capacity to command compliance. Although she is a woman, the Baroness asserts her authority as John's superior, forcing him to obey the command. The power disparity is obvious, with the Baroness's authoritative discourse portraying John as subordinate and controlled.

4. CONCLUSION

The study of the language styles used by the main characters in the movie *Cruella* (2021) found 65 language styles data. According to the data, these styles are classified into four categories: 26 casual styles, 22 consultative styles, 13 formal styles, and 4 intimate styles. However, this movie does not have the frozen style. As a result, it can be stated that the main characters use the casual style the most, whilst the intimate style is used the least.

In addition, the study found that participants and setting have the biggest influence on language style usage. When the main characters speak with different participants, their language styles alter. The same goes for the setting, since main characters use diverse language styles depending on time, place, and atmosphere. Aside from the two components listed above, the conversation's goal also determines the language styles used. However, it does not outweigh the influence of the participants or setting.

According to these findings, there are a lot of casual style in this movie due to the usage of contractions, slang phrases, and personal expressions. Specifically, Cruella and Baroness, the two main characters under study, have opposing socioeconomic statuses. Cruella, Estella's persona, is a woman of high social status, yet she spent her youth in the lower middle class. Estella, while not being educated as a noble, speaks politely in accordance with the participants and the settings in which she speaks. When she transforms into Cruella, she speaks in a forceful tone and confronts the status quo.

The Baroness, on the other hand, is a noblewoman who was well-regarded in London at the time. Although she is from the higher class, she does not always use formal style, as stereotypes suggest. She tends to use consultative or casual style with a controlling tone and frequently belittles the person she is speaking with. However, aside from Cruella, no one dares to confront the Baroness due to her social rank. As a result, the movie *Cruella* demonstrates that language is more than a tool for communication; it is also a political and psychological domain in which identities are at stake and authority is challenged.

5. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. Authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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