



ISSN: 1994-4217 (Print) 2518-5586(online)

## Journal of College of Education

Available online at: <https://eduj.uowasit.edu.iq>

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**Keywords :**

**Sociopragmatics ,  
Witticism , Disney  
Films.**



#### Article info

##### Article history:

Received 22.Mar.2025

Accepted 16.Apr.2025

Published 25.May.2025



### A Sociopragmatic Study of Witticism in Disney Films

#### A B S T R A C T

This study deals with witticism in Disney films from a sociopragmatic viewpoint. It explores the intricate role of witticism in the context of the beloved extracts of Disney films. Witticism is mainly selected because it has not been given a close analysis by researchers from a sociopragmatic perspective. This study, hence, is intended to achieve the following aims: pinpointing the pragmatic strategies used to reflect witticism in Disney films; and showing how witticism in Disney films is influenced by social factors that shape the humor and storytelling in these films. In line with its aims, this study hypothesizes that: characters in Disney films use a variety of pragmatic strategies to reflect witticism including representative, directive, commissive, expressive, and declarative speech acts in addition to other strategies like exaggeration, understatement, contrast, sarcasm, self-deprecation, self-deception, hyperbole, repetition, irony, and wordplay; witticism in Disney films is influenced by social factors as it reflects the cultural values and norms of the time and place in which witty utterances are made. To achieve its aims, this study follows certain steps: it briefly reviews the relevant literature about witticism; develops a model of witticism to analyze the data; analyses ten extracts qualitatively using the model developed in this study for this purpose; and discusses the findings to arrive at conclusions. The study ends up with many conclusions, the most central of which is that the strategic use of witticism through humour and clever remarks is to convey meaning, enhance storytelling, and reflect social and cultural norms.

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**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.31185/eduj.Vol59.Iss2.4332>

## دراسة تداولية اجتماعية للفكاهة في أفلام ديزني

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### المستخلص

تتناول هذه الدراسة موضوع الفكاهة في أفلام ديزني من منظور تداولي اجتماعي. وتستكشف الدور المعقد للفكاهة في سياق مقتطفات أفلام ديزني المحبوبة. ومن خلال استخدام نهج تداولي اجتماعي، تحاول هذه الدراسة استكشاف كيفية مساهمة الفكاهة في تطوير الشخصية، والتمثيل الثقافي، والتعليق الاجتماعي، وتفاعل الجمهور. وقد تم اختيار الفكاهة بشكل أساسي لأنها لم تخضع لتحليل دقيق من قبل الباحثين من منظور تداولي اجتماعي، بقدر ما يمكن للباحث التحقيق فيه. وبالتالي، يجب سد هذه الفجوة المعرفية من خلال فحص الفكاهة بطريقة تداولية اجتماعية في سياق أفلام ديزني. وبالتالي، تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تحقيق الأهداف التالية: تحديد الاستراتيجيات التداولية المستخدمة لتعكس الفكاهة في سياق أفلام ديزني؛ وإظهار كيف تتأثر الفكاهة في أفلام ديزني بالعوامل الاجتماعية التي تشكل الفكاهة وسرد القصص في هذه الأفلام. تماشياً مع أهدافها، تفترض هذه الدراسة أن: الشخصيات في أفلام ديزني تستخدم مجموعة متنوعة من الاستراتيجيات التداولية لتعكس الفكاهة، بما في ذلك أفعال الكلام التمثيلية والتوجيهية والإلزامية والتعبيرية والتصريحية، بالإضافة إلى استراتيجيات أخرى مثل المبالغة والتقليل من شأن الشيء والتباين والسخرية والاستخفاف بالنفس وخداع الذات والمبالغة والتكرار والسخرية والتلاعب بالألفاظ؛ تتأثر الفكاهة في أفلام ديزني بالعوامل الاجتماعية لأنها تعكس القيم والمعايير الثقافية للزمان والمكان اللذين تُلقى فيهما العبارات البراقة. ولتحقيق أهدافها، تتبع هذه الدراسة خطوات معينة: فهي تستعرض بإيجاز الأدبيات ذات الصلة بالتداولية الاجتماعية للفكاهة؛ وتضع نموذجاً للفكاهة لتحليل البيانات؛ وتحلل عشرة مقتطفات نوعياً باستخدام النموذج الذي طورته هذه الدراسة لهذا الغرض؛ وتناقش النتائج للوصول إلى بعض الاستنتاجات. وتنتهي الدراسة إلى العديد من الاستنتاجات، أهمها أن الاستخدام الاستراتيجي للفكاهة من خلال التعليقات الذكية هو لنقل المعنى، وتعزيز السرد، وعكس المعايير الاجتماعية والثقافية.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** التداولية الاجتماعية ، الفكاهة ، أفلام ديزني.

### 1. Introduction

From a sociopragmatic perspective, witticism can be considered as a socially and contextually situated form of humor which depends on brief, clever, and often unexpected humorous use of language. In a few words, witticism is the use of humorous clever remarks by interlocutors for different pragmatic and social purposes. In sociopragmatics, utterances are understood not only in terms of their literal meanings but also in how they are used in social interaction by considering the social norms and the power relations between interlocutors. Witticism, thus, is more than just funny utterances. As represented by clever and humorous remarks, witticism has a powerful effect on storytelling, especially in the context of Disney films which have enchanted audiences of all ages. Typically, Disney films are well-known for their unforgettable characters, many of whom are defined by their unique styles of humor and their use of witty utterances. This study, thus, aims to explore the way in which witticism is activated by the characters of Disney films to reflect cultural and social norms. In other

words, by investigating the use of witty utterances by the characters of Disney films through a sociopragmatic lens, this study, thus, seeks to uncover the deep social and cultural aspects of witticism. On this basis, this study attempts to discover the pragmatic strategies used to activate witticism by analyzing some extracts from the context of these films speeches. Therefore, this study makes an effort to answer the following questions:

1. What are the pragmatic strategies used to reflect witticism in the context of Disney films?
2. How do social factors influence the activation of witticism in the context of Disney films?

## **2. Theorizing Witticism in Disney Films**

### **2.1 Witticism from a Sociopragmatic Perspective**

Sociopragmatics probes the interplay of language use, social context, intended meaning, and interactional setting in which certain utterances are said. It is the intersection of social and pragmatic factors in communication and, thus, it is particularly relevant for understanding how witticism is used in Disney films. The study of witticism has long been a topic of interest in pragmatics, with particular attention given to how language functions in social contexts to achieve various communicative goals. Witticism can be considered as a quick, clever, and often humorous remark or observation. It involves the use of sharpness in language, frequently relying on wordplay, irony, or paradox.

It is often considered as a clever expression of humor which is crafted to entertain or provoke thought. A key characteristic of witticism is its intellectual appeal, aiming to surprise the audience with an unexpected turn of phrase or idea. The application of sociopragmatics to the study of witticism offers a clear insight into how it is activated in the given context. As a result, in the context of Disney films, witticism serves numerous roles, like character development, social commentary, cultural representation, and audience engagement. For Pritzker (1999: 848), witticism requires two characteristics to be performed which are humor and creativity. According to Dynel (2009: 13), witticism is humorous but cannot be labeled as a joke owing to its "non-joke" form.

Witticism is effective in the sense that it is, as Zwagerman (2010: 6) considers it, persuasive because there is somebody whom it persuades. It is a form of humor that relies on cleverness, wordplay, or surprise and, thus, it serves not only as a form of entertainment but also as a mechanism for social interaction, revealing the dynamics of power, identity, and social norms. In examining witticism, it is essential to consider its sociocultural implications within the communicative environment. Disney films, as a global cultural product, provide a rich data for exploring how humor functions within diverse social contexts and among varied characters. According to Holmes (2013), humor in media reflects not only the linguistic proficiency of characters, but also the social hierarchies and values embedded in the discourse. Disney films often deploy humor to navigate and negotiate social relationships, reflecting dominant cultural norms while simultaneously challenging them. For instance, Disney films, as Bell (1995) and Giroux (2001) prove, have been shown to reflect prevailing societal attitudes toward gender, race, and class. In this context, witticism often serves as a tool for reinforcing or subverting social expectations. Furthermore, the role of witticism in shaping character identities is pivotal. As noted by Attardo (1994), humor is not only a form

of expression but also a way to establish and negotiate power dynamics between characters. Disney films, through their diverse array of characters, employ humor strategically to highlight differences in status and influence the audience's perception of these characters. For instance, in films like *The Lion King* and *Aladdin*, characters such as Timon, Pumbaa, and Genie use humor to assert their identities and influence the social order within the narrative. Their use of witticism serves to establish relationships with other characters and shape audience attitudes toward them.

As Morreall (2009) discovers, recent studies of humor in children's media have focused on the role of witticism in the development of social competencies and emotional intelligence. In the context of Disney films, witticism can be seen as a vehicle for moral lessons, where humor softens the delivery of ethical teachings. For example, the humorous dialogues and the use of witticism in films like *Frozen* and *Zootopia* not only entertain but also implicitly convey messages about social inclusion, acceptance, and self-discovery in order to foster an environment where children learn to navigate complex social interactions. Autio (2021) explores some types of humor used in Disney animations such as verbal humor, visual gags, wordplay, and character-based jokes. Also, Romero (2021) analyzes the use of humor by sidekick characters using a multimodal framework to address forms of witty utterances, especially clever remarks, wordplay, and sarcastic exchanges that sidekicks often deliver. Additionally, Fazal (2024) explores how witticism is employed in animated films with the aim to underpin and circulate cultural, racial, and gender-based stereotypes through both verbal and visual semiotics. On this basis, the study of witticism in the context of Disney films through a sociopragmatic lens offers valuable insights into the role of humor in social interactions and the negotiation of cultural norms.

By analyzing the pragmatic strategies used in these films, as well as the social contexts in which they occur, this study is intended to reveal how humor functions as both a social device and a reflection of the societal values of the society, contributing to the broader discourse on language and identity in popular culture. In this study, witticism can operationally be defined as a brief, clever, and often humorous remark or observation, characterized by its sharpness, intellectual appeal, and the use of language in an unexpected or inventive way. It is typically intended to entertain, provoke thought, or highlight an ironic contrast, and often employs techniques such as wordplay, irony, or paradox to achieve its effect. Witticism is delivered in a social context, where its meaning and humor are understood by the audience, often based on shared cultural or intellectual references. It is worth mentioning that this operational definition focuses on the key components of a witticism which are cleverness, humor, linguistic creativity, and social context.

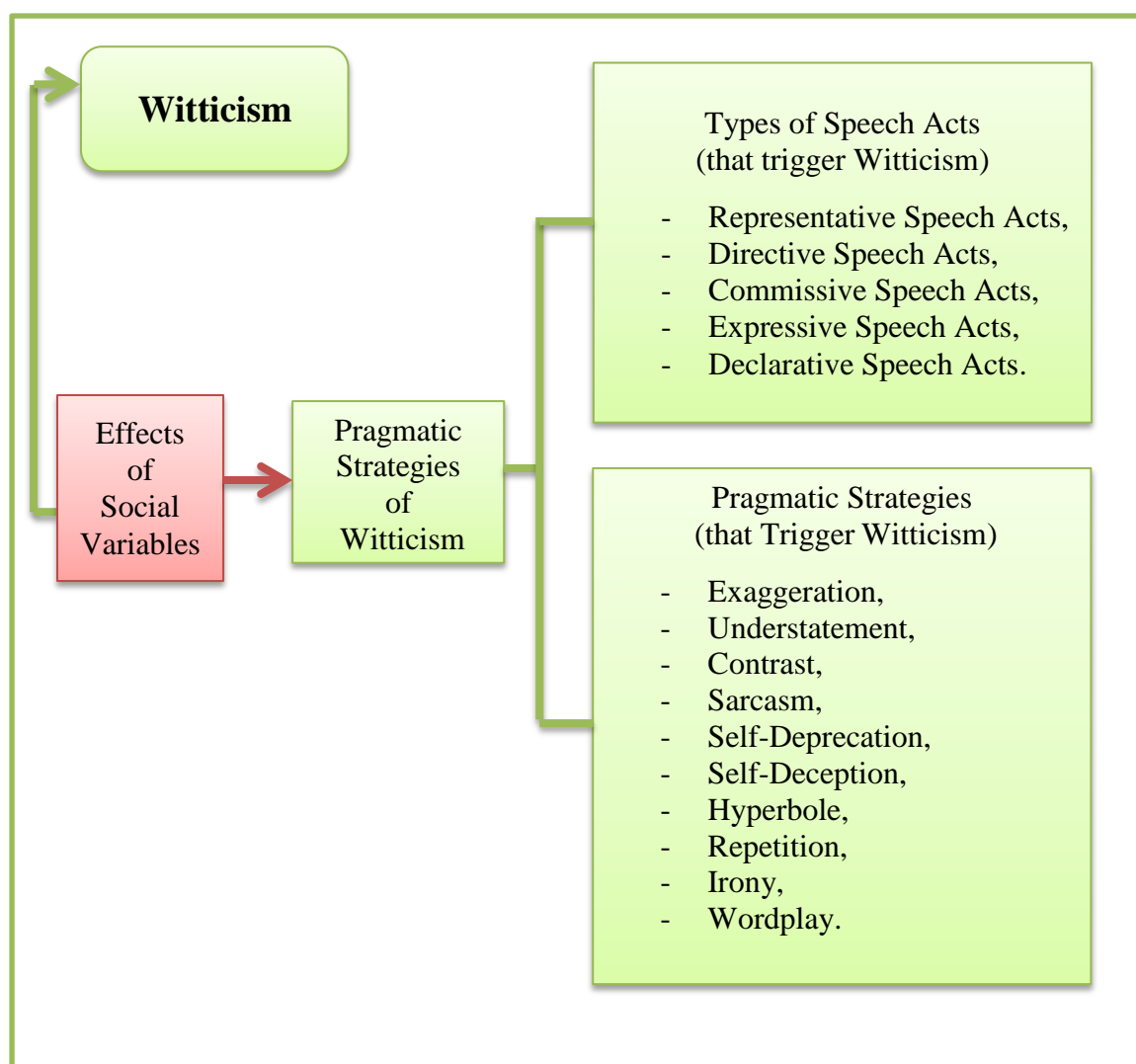
## **2.2 Pragmatic Strategies of Witticism**

To actively trigger witticism in the context of Disney films, several pragmatic strategies are suggested in this study. Among these strategies, exaggeration, understatement, contrast, sarcasm, self-deprecation, self-deception, hyperbole, repetition, irony, and wordplay are the most dominant as they best suit the context of Disney films. While exaggeration means enlarging or emphasizing something to an extreme degree for humorous or dramatic effect, understatement means presenting something as smaller or less important than it actually is,

often for comedic or ironic effect. Contrast means placing two different things side by side to highlight their differences, often leading to humor. Sarcasm refers to the idea of saying the opposite of what one means, often in a sharp or mocking tone, to express contempt or humor. As far as self-deprecation is concerned, it means taking fun of oneself in a humorous way, often to appear modest or to engage the audience. Concerning self-deception, it implies believing in or convincing oneself of something that is not true, often resulting in humor when the truth is revealed. For hyperbole, it is the extreme exaggeration for emphasis or effect. Repetition requires repeating words, phrases, or actions for emphasis or comedic timing. As regards irony, it implies the use of contrast between expectations and reality, often highlighting absurdity or humor. Wordplay, then, means using words in a clever way to create humor. In this study, all these strategies are activated to trigger witticism in Disney films.

### **3. Methodology**

This study follows a qualitative method of research. The data of this study is represented by (ten) extracts from ten very well-known Disney films; namely, Aladdin, The Lion King, Frozen, Mulan, The Emperor's New Groove, Beauty and the Beast, Hercules, Tangled, Toy Story, and Winnie the Pooh. In this study, Searle's (1976) taxonomy of speech acts is adapted to include all the speech acts which suit the use of witticism. Other pragmatic strategies such as exaggeration, understatement, contrast, sarcasm, self-deprecation, self-deception, hyperbole, repetition, irony, and wordplay are also activated in these extracts. The model concentrates on the effects of the social variables on the use of pragmatic strategies and the analysis of the selected extracts depending on the use of speech acts and the aforesaid strategies in addition to the consideration of the social context in which these extracts are uttered. The proposed model is clearly sketched in Figure (1) below:



**Figure (1): A Sociopragmatic Model of Witticism**

#### 4. Data Analysis

In this section, ten extracts are analyzed by means of the model developed in this study for this purpose.

##### Extract (1)

Genie: "*Ten thousand years will give you such a crick in the neck!*"

**Name of the Disney Film:** Aladdin.

**Analysis:** In this extract, Genie uses a representative speech act of asserting to assert his confinement for ten thousand years and to provide information about his past experience. Also, he uses the speech act of complaining about the physical discomfort he has experienced in his confinement. Genie wittily exaggerates the duration of his confinement by saying "*Ten thousand years*" to accentuate the discomfort he has endured in this confinement. Such use of exaggeration creates witticism and a kind of comedic effect which highlights his larger-than-life personality and his magical ability which is both a source of wonder and comic relief in the context of the film. Likewise, he uses the strategy of understatement in his utterance

"such a crick in the neck" to downplay his suffering and make it seem trivial and comic. Hence, the contrast between the length of time and his complaint leads to witticism.

### **Extract (2)**

Timon: *"What do you want me to do, dress in drag and do the hula?"*

**Name of the Disney Film:** The Lion King.

**Analysis:** In this extract, Timon employs a directive speech of asking when he asks *"What do you want me to do?"* to underscore the absurdity of his situation. Such inquiry is, in fact, a rhetorical question which is not meant to obtain an explicit answer but to emphasize the absurdity of the situation. In this context, Timon tries to use witticism for the sake of diffusing a tense situation when Timon and Pumbaa were thinking about a way to help Simba. Furthermore, Timon uses the strategy of exaggeration when he suggests the idea of dressing in drag and doing the hula. Sarcasm is also triggered by Timon when he uses a sarcastic tone, poking fun at the difficulty of finding solutions to help his friend. This sarcasm helps to lighten the mood and create a comic relief.

By suggesting a solution where he makes himself look ridiculous, Timon utilises the strategy of self-deprecation to emphasize his readiness to be the centre of attention for the witty consequence.

### **Extract (3)**

Olaf: *"Oh, I love it. It's so cute. It's like a little baby unicorn".*

**Name of the Disney Film:** Frozen.

In this extract, Olaf employs an expressive speech act as he expresses his positive emotions and admiration for his nose to reflect his feelings and attitudes. He clearly expresses his emotion as is clear in his repeated use of *"I love it"* to convey his excitement and positive feelings. Olaf's use of witticism reflects themes of love and acceptance and echoes his innocent and childlike spirit which provides a comic scene to the audience. Olaf employs the strategy of hyperbole when he compares his nose to a *"baby unicorn"* to exaggerate its cuteness and add a humorous and whimsical touch to his observation. His utterance also implies the use of simile using the comparative marker *"like"* and such simile is both imaginative and relatable as it enables the audience to visualize his view and share in his delight.

### **Extract (4)**

Mushu: *"Dishonor! Dishonor on your whole family! Make a note of this. Dishonor on you, dishonor on your cow, dis..."*

**Name of the Disney Film:** Mulan.

**Analysis:** Mushu, in this extract, uses an expressive speech act as he expresses his strong emotions of disapproval and outrage by repeating the word *"dishonour"* to underscore his condemnation and disappointment. Mushu resorts to the strategies of exaggeration and sarcasm to highlight his role as a comic sidekick. His witticism also mirrors the cultural context of the society. Mushu employs the strategy of hyperbole by exaggerating the



consequences of the character's actions to a ridiculous extent which adds a comedic effect to the scene. The strategy of repetition is triggered as clear in the repetitive use of the utterance "*dishonor*" where such repetition serves to strengthen the gravity of the accusation while also adding a witty, rhythmic, and emphatic quality to Mushu's utterances.

Mushu also injects witticism into the situation when he uses the unexpected and absurd utterance "*dishonor on your cow*" which lightens the mood and provides a kind of comic relief. The strategy of sarcasm is also apparent in Mushu's sarcastic tone when he mockingly berates other characters for their actions. The use of this strategy helps to underline the witty situation and Mushu's role as a comedic sidekick.

### Extract (5)

Kuzco: "*No touchy!*"

**Name of the Disney Film:** The Emperor's New Groove.

**Analysis:** In this extract, Kuzco makes use of the directive speech of commending which is obvious in his very direct and straightforward command "No touchy". The brevity and clarity of his utterance emphasize his authoritative tone. Kuzco's utterance showcases his self-centered and arrogant personality. His witticism reflects his personal growth and transformation, as Kuzco learns to become a more compassionate and selfless leader. Besides, Kuzco resorts to the strategy of colloquialism by using the informal and playful utterance "No touchy" which makes the command sounds witty, casual, and humorous, and such command, thus, reflects Kuzco's quirky personality.

### Extract (6)

Lumière: "*If it's not Baroque, don't fix it*".

**Name of the Disney Film:** Beauty and the Beast.

**Analysis:** In this extract, Lumière cleverly uses one utterance which serves to be various speech acts. His utterance could be assertive as he intends to make an assertion about the value and quality of the Baroque style to emphasize his appreciation for the artistic period and its influence. His utterance could also be directive in the sense that he suggests that if something is working well in the Baroque style, it should not be changed. Lumière's utterance can also be interpreted as a speech act of advising that things should be left as they are if they are functioning well. Lumière utilizes the strategy of wordplay when he resorts to pun by playing on the phrase "*If it ain't broke, don't fix it*". He replaces "broke" with "*Baroque*" referencing the ornate and elaborate artistic style. This clever wordplay adds humor and wit to his utterance. Furthermore, this kind of witticism highlights the theme of inner beauty and the importance of looking beyond appearances.

Also, Lumière's use of "Baroque" can be considered a cultural reference which hints at a specific period and style in art and architecture. Such reference adds a kind of complexity to his use of witticism the humor and showcases Lumière's cultured and refined personality.



**Extract (7)**

Hades: "*I'm cool, I'm fine, I'm fine*".

**Name of the Disney Film:** Hercules.

**Analysis:** In this extract, Hades, in his attempt to convey a sense of calmness, uses an expressive speech act to convey his emotions, but in a restrained and deceptive way. His utterance is also declarative as he declares "*I'm cool, I'm fine*" to reflect his emotional state and to inform others of his supposed composure. Hades' quick witticism and sarcastic humor reflect his position as the antagonist of the film and highlight the theme of heroism and the struggle between good and evil. Hades uses the strategy of repetition when he repeats the utterance "*I'm fine*" to stress his efforts to maintain control and to seem calm and composed. The strategy of self-deception is also activated when Hades utters "*I'm cool*" and "*I'm fine*" in his attempt to convince himself and others that he is not bothered and to mask true emotions. Irony is also used Hades because this utterance is delivered with an ironic tone in the sense that he is apparently not fine. Such use of irony is intended to produce witticism and to add depth to his character by showcasing the disparity between his utterance and his real feelings. Thus, the witty delivery of Hades' utterance adds a layer of humor to the scene which serves to entertain the audience and provides comic relief.

**Extract (8)**

Flynn Rider: "*You were my new dream*".

**Name of the Disney Film:** Tangled.

**Analysis:** In this extract, Flynn employs an expressive speech act to articulate his emotions and feelings towards Rapunzel to reflect his internal state and affection. His utterance can also be interpreted as a declarative speech act to emphasize his commitment and devotion to Rapunzel. Flynn also showcases his romantic and charming personality and his witticism is reflected in the demonstration of his love and the importance of following his dream.

The strategy of contrast is activated by Flynn when he contrasts his previous dreams, which were more self-centered and materialistic, with his new dream, Rapunzel, to emphasize his character development and the shift in his values.

**Extract (9)**

Buzz Lightyear: "*To infinity and beyond!*"

**Name of the Disney Film:** Toy Story.

**Analysis:** Buzz, in this extract, triggers an expressive speech act to express his excitement and adventurous spirit and to convey his emotions and enthusiasm. His utterance is also declarative as he intends to make an enthusiastic proclamation and show his confidence and determination. He uses the strategy of exaggeration because the idea of going beyond infinity is impossible, but this exaggeration is activated to reflect his adventurous, aspirational, and heroic personality. His use of witticism highlights the theme of friendship and the importance

of believing in oneself. Buzz also makes use of the strategy of catchphrase by saying this utterance which is helpful in making his character memorable.

### **Extract (10)**

Eeyore: *"It's not much of a tail, but I'm sort of attached to it".*

**Name of the Disney Film:** Winnie the Pooh.

### **Analysis:**

Eeyore uses a representative speech act to describe his tail as "not much" and to give a description that mirrors his humble view of himself. This speech act helps to characterize Eeyore's self-image. Eeyore's utterance can also be interpreted as an expressive speech act to convey his feelings of attachment to his tail and to reveal his emotional state and personal connection to the tail, despite its perceived shortcomings. Eeyore operates the strategy of self-deprecation by downplaying the significance of his tail in his utterance *"It's not much of a tail"*, and such strategy makes his character endearing to the audience. Understatement is also activated by Eeyore in the utterance *"not much of a tail"* in order to underestimate the significance of his tail, which in reality is a significant part of his identity. Such activation of this strategy adds to the humor and poignancy of his utterance. Eeyore's dry humor and self-deprecating wit reflect his melancholic personality. His witticism highlights the theme of friendship and the importance of accepting oneself and others.

## **5. Results and Discussion**

After sociopragmatically analyzing the data of this study, the results demonstrate the regularity of the activation of witticism used in various Disney films. Such activation of witty remarks contributes to the popularity and appeal of the characters in the context of Disney films. The results also show that witticism can be activated by means of various strategies such as puns, sarcasm, irony, and wordplay, and this result shows the different ways by which witticism can be employed by the characters in Disney film. Some characters in Disney films are known for their witticism, such as Genie from "Aladdin", Timon from "The Lion King" and Olaf from "Frozen" and they use various witty utterances to enhance their roles and endear themselves to the audience. Additionally, the results reveal how witticism reflects the cultural and social contexts of the society due to the fact that witty utterances address many cultural stereotypes, social norms, and character development. This study, thus, proves that witty characters in Disney films are often more memorable and relatable to the audience so that witticism helps to drive the narrative and engage the audience. The findings indicate that witticism is used to address cultural representations in Disney films to highlight both positive and negative aspects in society such as challenging certain stereotypes or reinforcing them. It is also proved that witticism serves as a state of social commentary in the sense that it can be used to critique certain social norms, behaviors, or institutions. Moreover, it is shown that witticism in Disney films has an educational value since it can be used as a powerful tool for teaching moral lessons, promoting critical thinking, and encouraging empathy among the audience.

## 6. Conclusions

This study ends up with several noteworthy conclusions as follow:

1. Witticism is the use of humorous clever remarks to reduce the tension of a particular situation or a particular group under stress.
2. In the context of Disney films, witticism is not merely for entertainment, it is carefully crafted to resonate with the audience, addressing cultural stereotypes, social norms, and contemporary issues.
3. Via the extensive analysis of iconic utterances from the humorous interaction in Disney films, this study identifies the multiple uses of representative, directive, commissive, expressive, and declarative speech acts.
4. The activation of witticism in the context of Disney films requires the use of certain key pragmatic strategies including exaggeration, understatement, contrast, sarcasm, self-deprecation, self-deception, hyperbole, repetition, irony, and wordplay.
5. Witticism serves multiple functions in the sense that it endears the characters of Disney films to audiences, addresses cultural stereotypes and social norms, and provides subtle critiques of societal behaviors and institutions.
6. In Disney films, witticism implies educational values it demonstrates how it fosters critical thinking, empathy, and moral lessons.
7. There is a kind of universal appeal to the activation of witticism in Disney films which transcends cultural and generational boundaries, making these films timeless.
8. Socially speaking, witticism is used to convey social commentary, reinforce cultural values, and foster connections with audiences across different societies.
9. Witticism has a multifaceted role in Disney films as it reflects and shapes social and cultural norms, enhances character development, and engages audiences.
10. Witticism in Disney films is shaped by contextual factors such as character relationships, social hierarchies, and cultural references. Moreover, the pragmatic functions of humor highlight the complex interplay between language and social meaning in cinematic discourse.
11. From a sociopragmatic perspective, witticism in Disney films involves the interplay of clever remarks, wordplay, and humour and such interplay creates memorable and relatable characters, conveys meaningful messages, and fosters a deep connection with the audience across generations and cultures.
12. Witticism in Disney films reflect real-life conversational strategies while also being heightened for dramatic or comedic effect. This dual function allows filmmakers to craft dialogues that resonate with audiences on multiple levels, reinforcing the role of humor in shaping social interactions.

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