

## Offensive Language in Penguins of Madagascar movie

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### **Abstract**

This study employs an eclectic model for the analysis of offensive language features in *Penguins of Madagascar (2014)*, American children's movie. The model adopted involves a sociolinguistic perspective based on Tagliamonte's (2012) social variables and Holms' (2013) social factors and social dimensions. Other perspectives in the model adopted for the study include a semantic level, that focuses on connotation, denotation and euphemism as proposed by Allan & Burridge (2006), a pragmatic level, including deixis, and politeness according to Yule (2010), and a semiotic level, that revolves around visual representation of social actors network suggested by Van leeuwen (2008), facial expression by Ekman and Priesen (2003) and color by Kress& Van leeuwen (2002). The analysis yields the conclusion that there are no age, social class or gender differences in employing offensive words such as name-calling, verbal violence and insults that are used to

express negative and aggressive emotions as well as to show intimacy, humor, solidarity and joy. These words are also used to discredit the counterparts and to provoke confrontations between distant participants.

**Keywords:** Sociolinguistics, Social variables, Offensive language, Children cinematic discourse, Politeness, Connotation, Denotation, Facial Expressions, Colour.

### اللغة المستهجنة في فيلم بطاريق مدغشقر

#### المخلص:

يتناول هذا البحث تحليلاً انتقائياً للغة المستهجنة المتداولة في فيلم بطاريق مدغشقر (2014). تم اختيار "المنهج الانتقائي" لدراسة الألفاظ النابية المتداولة على نطاق واسع في وسائل الإعلام وخاصة الأفلام المخصصة للأطفال من جوانب لغوية واجتماعية مختلفة، فقد تم التركيز على المتغيرات والعوامل والابعاد الاجتماعية من منظور علم اللغة الاجتماعي لتاجليمونت (2012) و هولمز (2013)، والمعنى الدلالي للكلمة الى جانب لطف التعبير من منظور علم الدلالة لالان وبريدج (2006)، واستراتيجية التأدب والإشارة لجورج يول (2010) واخيراً التمثيل المرئي لشبكة الفاعلين الاجتماعيين لثيو فان لوين (2008)، تعبيرات الوجه لإكمان وبريسون (2003)، و اللون لكريس وفان لوين (2002) من المنظور السيميائي. وقد اوضحت الدراسة انه لا يوجد فروق في العمر أو الطبقة الاجتماعية أو الجنس في استخدام الألفاظ النابية مثل الشتائم والعنف اللفظي والإهانات كأسلوب للتعبير عن المشاعر السلبية والعدوانية وكذلك إظهار الحميمية والفكاهة والتضامن والفرح. تُستخدم هذه الكلمات أيضاً لتشويه سمعة المخاطب وإثارة المواجهات بين المتحاورين.

## 1. Introduction

The current study is implemented to handle offensive language in children's movies. Childhood is an important stage in human life through which the child gains experiences and acquires knowledge. Nowadays, children are surrounded by some other educators, other than parents or teachers. TV or cinematic movies are hypothesized to be a source of knowledge and education to young children, and this may have a profound effect on children's cognitive development and social behaviour. Offensive language in children's movies is expected to affect children's sociolinguistic behaviour. The movies have become a fertile ground for the circulation of such language, especially the animated movies that have great impact on children's memories, awareness in addition to the cognitive and behavioral development. Lippi-Green (2012) argues:

Children are shaped by the ideas that they are constantly presented in these films, especially when it comes to language stereotypes and ideologies. Children are not passive agents. They are very capable of assimilating bias and prejudices at very young ages. (p.6)

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## 2. Statement of the research problem:

The major problem of this study lies in the researchers' observation of limited examination of offensive language usage in children's movies which have not received the same scholarly attention as the adult movies. Additionally, the limited use of eclectic (multidisciplinary) approach in handling offensive language and its categories in movies in general and children's movie, in particular, raises the researchers' attention to the importance of conducting such a study. Thus, the aim of this study is to enlarge the body of research on this subject and show that offensive language has many significant functions in language use.

## 3. Research Questions

1. What are the most recurrent types of offensive words found in the selected children's movie?
2. How are offensive words socially functioned in children's movies?
3. What are the common social contexts that motivate the characters, in the movie under analysis, to utter foul words?

4. To what extent are social factors such as social class, gender and age, influence the attitude of the speaker towards the use of offensive words?

### 3.1. Objectives of Study

Based on the formulation of the previous questions, the objectives of this study are presented as follow:

- To delineate the different types of offensive words spoken in children's movies.
- To examine the functions of foul words that is mentioned in kids' movies.
- To understand the motives behind using offensive language in children's movies under analysis.
- To test whether there are any differences in using offensive language in movies regarding social class, gender and age differences.

## 4. Theoretical Framework

### 4.1. Standard and non-standard language

Language is generally categorized as have two major varieties, standard and non-standard. Standard variates are used in official settings, occasions (media, schools, conferences, and newspapers) and in textbooks. Davies (2016)

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defines the standard variety as “the dialect of a language that has been standardized and therefore has an agreed writing system, grammar, and dictionary” (pp.124-125). It is the dialect which is used by educated and prestigious individuals of a society. The current study deals with offensive language as an element of the non-standard language.

#### 4.1.1. **Offensive language**

Offensive language is a vital and controversial topic in sociolinguistic study as it is closely related to social and cultural factors; it reflects the values and attitudes of people through social practice. Offensive language is a general item of other aliases which are used interchangeably such as foul language, rude language, bad language, dirty language, taboo language, forbidden language, swear language, bawdy language, cuss language and strong language. It is an element of non-slandered language as it is concerned with describing forbidden and tabooed things that are inconsistent with the traditions, values and religion in society. Offensive words are viewed by any society as indecent, disrespectful, unacceptable and forbidden. Hughes (2006) confirms that this type of language involves “a particular choice of diction or vocabulary regarded as appropriate for a certain topic or social situation” (p. 386)

Battistella (2005) confirms that offensive language is variable; it changes from time to time and is influenced by social, political and historical forces. Additionally, this type of language differs according to the contexts, beliefs, society and culture in which they are uttered. Offensive words are not innate; people learn to distinguish between what they should to say and what they should not say in communication by regarding their social norms.

Offensive words have both positive and negative impact on both speakers and listeners. These words intend to belittle, demean, and disparage another person or somebody. The offended people know that they are insulted by the words used and the speaker's tone of voice. On the other hand, it has positive effects on the speaker for it causes some sort of catharsis (Jay, 2009). In other words, the use of these words reduces the individual's physical reaction (physical violence) mitigating negative emotions such as anger, pain and frustration. In addition, offensive words are utilized to relieve people's stress in daily life.

Over time, offensive words have become intensive, frequent and multifaceted as they are increasingly used by people in various social contexts and situations. Sociolinguists provide various taxonomies of offensive language. For example, Jay (1992) and Battistella (2005) classify offensive

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words into cursing, profanity, blasphemy, taboo, obscenity, vulgarity, swearing, slang, epithets, insults& slurs, scatology, name-calling and verbal aggression. The themes of these categories vary according to their degrees of offensiveness. These categories are usually interconnected and can't be separated from one another.

According to Bostrom, et al. (1973), there are five different functions of offensive language:

1. **To draw attention to oneself:** The offensive words are utilized to get the hearer's attention (e.g., what the *fucking* are you doing?)
2. **To discredit someone or something:** This is a way for mocking authority and society and for denigrate the issues adopted by the institution such as *fuck the pig*. This slogan aims to show contempt for the authority.
3. **To provoke confrontations:** Offensive language aims to incite the audience to violent reactions.
4. **To provide catharsis for the users:** Offensive words have a psychological function for their users. The speaker uses such words to get rid of negative emotions such as intensive frustration, anger, and hatred. By

employing such words, the speaker can calm down and avoid physical violence.

#### 5. To establish interpersonal identification:

Offensive words are used to create a kind of intimacy between the interlocutors in casual conversations such as the interaction between close friends specially teenagers.

Rassin & Muris (2005) point out five different motives for uttering offensive words: relieve tension, habit, rhetorical force, shocking and jocularly. The first two motives are “automatic conscious”, but the other three motives are “conscious linguistic choice of the speaker”. The first motive is concerned with **catharsis** such as fuck, shit, damn. The motive of **habit** is a type of linguistic filler which is used automatically in spontaneous communication (Crystal, 2010). The **rhetorical force** motive is used to emphasize a word or statement such as *shit it is hot today*. The fourth motive, **shocking** or insulting the audience, is used to express strong emotions such as anger or frustration from another individual. The fifth type of motives, **jocularly or endearment**, is sometimes used for satire. It also shows love and friendship between two persons at the same age such as *what’s up, my nigger*. Context plays a major role in this motive regardless of negative emotions or situations.

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## 5. Methodology

The model adopted for the current study aims to achieve a comprehensive and meaningful analysis, both linguistically and socially, of offensive words that are widely used in media in general and children's movies in particular. The major reason for choosing this model is that; the researcher seeks to investigate this issue from different facets to achieve a full coverage of the offensive language. This model involves various levels of analysis that are describes as follows:

- A sociolinguistic level that is based on Tagliamonte's (2012) social variables and Holms' (2013) social factors and social dimensions.
- A semantic level that involves connotation, denotation and euphemism as defined by Allan & Burridge (2006).
- A pragmatic level that fousees on deixis, and politeness according to Yule (2010).
- A semiotic level which comprises visual representation of social actors network by Theo Van leeuwen (2008), facial expression by Ekman and Priesen (2003) and color by Kress & Van leeuwen (2002).

The data under scrutiny is *Penguins of Madagascar* (2014), an American children's animation movie. The researchers choose this movie because of the diversity and number of offensive words it contains. The data are presented as extracts where the offensive words that are included are underlined and marked as bold.

## 6. Analysis :An Example

### 6.1. Penguins of Madagascar (2014)

“YOU low-down, dirty, mangy, filthy, flea-bitten, bum-sniffing, toilet drinker.”

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### **6.1.1. Sociolinguistic perspective:**

#### **6.1.1.1. Social variables (social class, age and gender)**

These insults are uttered by Skipper, an adult male leader of penguin's family. These rude words are directed to Classified, an adult male leader of the North Wind team.

#### **6.1.1.2. Social factors (participants, setting, topic and function)**

When the NW team finds an island in the sea where Dave is hiding, Skipper became happy that he may find Dave. Later, Skipper discovers that classified follows the penguins by injecting them with a tracking device. He insults Classified for deceiving the penguins. This utterance serves as expressive; the speaker expresses his anger from the addressee.

#### **6.1.1.3. Social dimensions (social distance, status, formality, referential and effective function scales)**

This interaction is taking place between two distant participants: Classified and Skipper. Despite the former's power and high status, the latter insults him to demean his behavior. The choice of these rude words denotes the less solidarity between the interlocutors. This utterance has an

affective function; the speaker expresses his anger from being deceived.

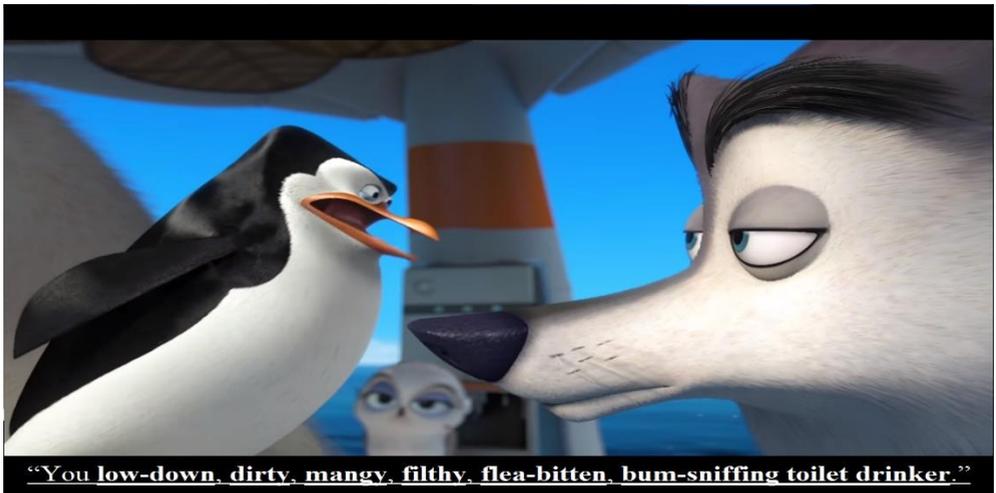
### 6.1.2. Semantic perspective (denotative and connotative meaning)

Offensive word	Its denotative meaning	The connotation meaning
Low down	“The most important information about something” (Cambridge learner’s dictionary, 2004, p.396)	This utterance connotes classified’s dishonesty and deception of the penguins. It also connotes that the speaker is dissatisfied of the presence of another leader. The speaker uses these insults to express his annoyance from the addressee’s behavior.
Dirty	“not clean” (p.189)	
Mangy	“affected with or resulting from mange” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.)	
Filthy	“extremely dirty” (p.253)	
Flea-bitten	“bitten by a flea or fleas” (Dictionary.com, n.d.)	
Bum-sniffing	“someone who takes a pleasure from the sniffing of male bums” (Urban Dictionary, n.d.)	
Toilet drinker	“when a human or animal drink water from toilet” (Urban Dictionary, n.d.)	

### 6.1.3. Pragmatic perspective

6.1.3.1. **Deixis:** the speaker utilizes the personal deixis in this situation by employing the second person pronoun (you) in a singular form to direct these insults to Classified.

6.1.3.2. **Politeness:** the speaker follows the impoliteness strategy by using insults and slurs to demean and disvalue the addressee's bad behavior.



### 6.1.4. Visual perspective

Figure (1): a screenshot of the interaction of scene five. (min.00:46:19)

There are two major represented participants involved in this scene: Skipper and Classified. This feature is clearly explained by the following points:

**A-Social distance:** this feature is achieved by the filmmaker's use of the extreme close up shot which denotes the close personal distance between the interlocutors.

**B-Social relation:** vertically, the involved participants are represented by eye-level angle that denotes that there is no power difference between interlocutors, or even the viewers. Horizontally, Skipper is depicted in the left side position for he is well known for the viewer.

**C-Social interaction:** the interlocutors address each other directly; it denotes their involvement in the same thing.

➤ **Facial expression**

Skipper's facial features express his anger from his partner; his sharp gaze, his eyebrows are lowered and squeezing together, his eyes are tight and his mouth is opened for shouting.



Classified's facial expressions are neutral for his not caring of the Skipper's angry action. It denotes his self-confidence and high ego.

### ➤ **Colors**

There are six different colors involved in this scene: black, blue, white, gray (light and dark) and orange. The black and white colors are the actual and usual color of the penguin. In this scene, it symbolizes Skipper's angry mood. Classified is represented by the light and dark gray that signifies his calmness reaction. The blue color is apparent in the sky that denotes Classified's coolness, and confidence. Finally, the orange color is clear in the boat that symbolizes the comedic behavior when Skipper became calm after thinking of Classified' plan.

## **7. Conclusion**

The current study is undertaken to conduct an eclectic analysis of offensive language of one of American children movies; Penguins of Madagascar (2014). Nine extracts of different situations have been examined. After a close analysis, the conclusion yields that there are fifteen offensive words used in this movie. The next table provides a list of the frequency of these words as follows:

Offensive utterance of occurrence	No.	Category	Motive (emotions)	Function	Social variables
Doomed	1	Taboo (death)	Despair	To provide catharsis	Young male homeless penguin
Sass-mouth	1	Verbal violence (countering)	Ego or control	To discredit someone	An adult male
Villain	1	Insult	Catharsis (anger and hatred)	To provide catharsis	An adult male harp seal
Silly willy	1	Insult	Contempt	To discredit someone	An adult male harp seal
Ludicrous	1	Insult	Catharsis (anger)	To provide catharsis	An adult male
Crikey	4	Mild swear word	Catharsis (fear)	To provide catharsis	A young homeless male

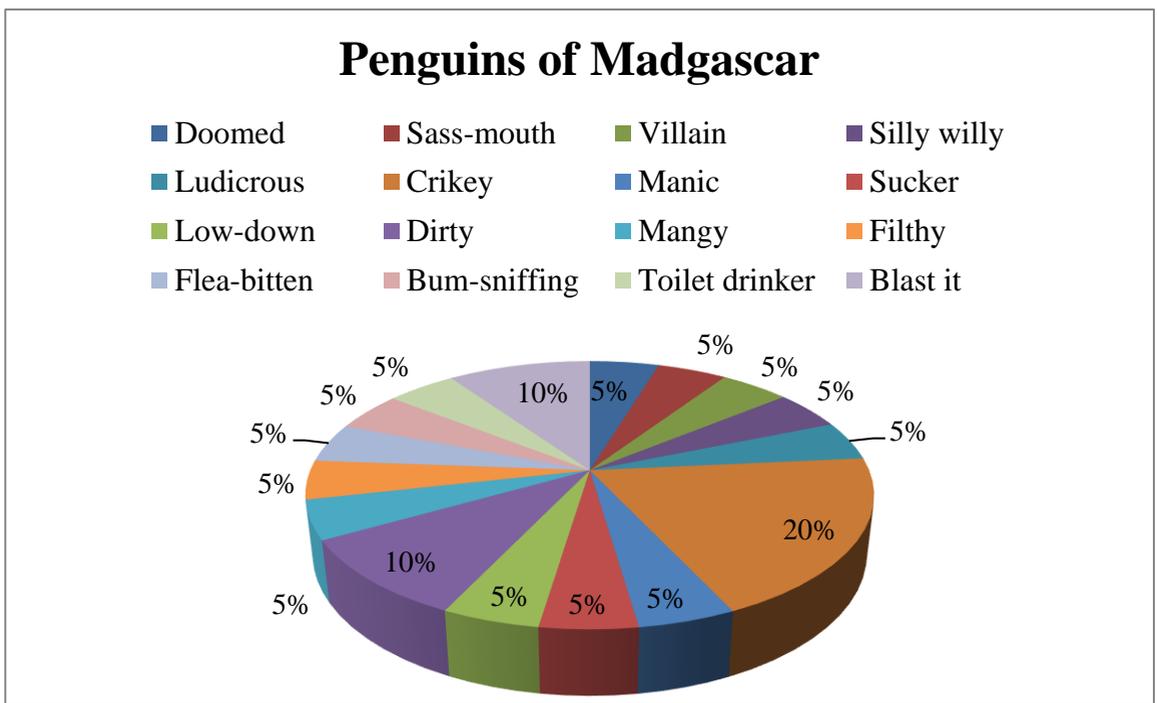
Maniac	1	Name-calling (mental health)	Catharsis (anger)	To provide catharsis	An adult male
Sucker	1	Insult	Catharsis (proud)	To discredit someone	An adult male harp seal
low-down, dirty, mangy, filthy, flea-bitten, bum-sniffing, toilet drinker	1	Insult	Catharsis (anger)	To provide catharsis	An adult male
Blast it	2	Profanity	Catharsis (anger)	To provide catharsis	An adult male leader

Table (1): *List of offensive words included in Penguins of Madagascar movie*

Considering the foregoing table, it is revealed that the most frequent used categories of offensive words are insult with an average of (36%), swearing (29%) and profanity (14%). This table also shows that all the participants who utter these offensive words are adult males to provide catharsis; to express aggressive or negative emotions such as anger. It is noticeable that there is a shortage of female figures in this movie. The only female participant is Eva, one of the NW

team who is considered as inactive character. In the line with providing catharsis, most of these offensive words are used to discredit the addressee. The following figure shows the percentages of the offensive words uttered in this movie:

Figure (2): Frequencies of occurrence of the offensive words



in *Penguins of Madagascar* movie

- **Variable findings of Penguins of Madagascar movie:**

Beside the offensive words, the researcher notices some offensive scenes that can adversely affect the child's behavior (the target audience) as follows:

- There are two sexual scenes involved in this movie that are not suitable for children. First, two male penguins (Private and Kowalski) are kissing each other. Second, a female character (Eva) kisses a male one (Kowalski). In addition, the penguins are slapping each other on the butt.
- A verbal violent scene is noticed when Skipper interrupts Classified's talk by eating the cheesy dibbles. This scene may affect the child's behavior with his parents and other social members such as teachers, relatives etc.

There are some scary scenes that can disturb children such as Dave's violent reaction against the penguins; turning them into savage monsters.

To sum up, the concluding remarks include the following:

- There are no differences in using offensive words by genders, all age groups and all social classes. This type of language becomes a lifestyle in conversation in any community.

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- The researcher notices that the most favored types of offensive terms used in children movies are name-calling, verbal violence and insults to express certain emotions. Although the involved words are weak and mild offensive, it may have negative impact on children's behavior (the target audience of these movies).
  - Religious terms are not intended to attack the divine power, but to express different emotions (such as astonishment, sadness, and happiness)
  - Finally, censorship could be a good solution for this serious problem. In other words, the filmmakers should reconsider the topics of children cartoon in addition to make a strategy by parents and educational institutions in treating the usage of offensive words among children.

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