



Moving Media Influences on Children's Linguistic Behaviour

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ABSTRACT With the technological age, accessibility to the moving image is almost at the reach of each and every child in the society. "The presence and intensity of media influences [...] are increasingly recognized as an important part of the social ecology of children and youth, and these influences have become more visible and volatile in recent decades." (Jowett & Fuller-Seeler, 1996). Nowadays, with all the three-dimensional animations and better quality of images and sounds, kids are more attracted towards the motion picture and while enjoying it, they can easily link the dialogues with its concept. Ultimately, the hearing and visualization accumulated during these sessions shape their linguistic behaviour as well as their social attitude. Children have the tendency of imitating their favourite cartoon characters and Bollywood heroes, which influences their language lexically and phonologically. As a result, unconsciously, they include speech acts from these characters into their daily communication and sometimes kids idealize them to such an extent that they will copy their dressing and speaking styles by adjusting their accent and tone. This paper will study the linguistic and cultural behaviour of kids under the influence of the moving media and how it contributes in building their cultural and linguistic personality both positively and negatively.

In the current century, the moving media has become a complete part of the family. It "is an important tool for most people, young or old, as today most information are delivered to the public via this technology." (Jusoff, 2009) It is easily accessible either for entertainment or knowledge, "thus occupying the vast majority of children's leisure time, movie-going and magazine reading had decreased considerably, and television had taken over the job of entertaining children, replacing playmates, babysitters and comic books." (Newman, 1995) Various organizations and researchers (e.g. Anderson & Pempek, 2005; Griffiths & Machin, 2003) have raised questions against the effects of media on children's psychological and linguistic behaviour.

There is an underlying relationship between media and linguistic in the sense that "the analysis of a film as a systematic set of codes, conventions and structures which can be learnt, modified and represented cognitively has generated some common ground between cognitive psychology and film and television theory, particularly in linguistics [...] this tradition of studying film and television is indebted to the semiotic teachings of the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure." (Pearson & Simpson, 2000) As per the rule of nature in order "to acquire the native language, a child must do two things: Learn the words of the language and extract the relevant phonological characteristics of those words," (Storkel & Morissette, 2002) these two functions happen both consciously and unconsciously under several influences, including that of media.

The foremost effect of media is IMITATION, which has been omnipresent in the society since ages. According to the Greek philosopher, Plato, "There are three arts which are concerned with all things: one which uses, another which makes, and a third which imitates them." In fact, to intensify this statement, his student Aristotle claims that "imitation is natural to humans from childhood" and it is through imitation that we develop our linguistic, academic and social behaviour. Thus, a child imitating his favourite cartoon character or hero is merely following his unconscious sense, and out of innocence copies whatever he conceives without making the difference between right and wrong utterances or behaviour. This is so, as young children are often unable to separate the reality from media, which is hardly representative of anyone's reality, but kids do have a harder time making this distinction. Thus, "since television conditions the viewer's perspective to accept the unreal as real [...] children with limited experience

can easily confuse screen fantasy with reality." (Hefzallah, 1987)

In fact, the two crucial theories relating media to the unconscious mind is the cognitive approach and the psychoanalytic approach. According to the theorist Christian Metz the former is the 'unconscious mind', which is most closely paralleled by the structures of film and the experience of film-viewing. The second one is concerned about the cognitive effects of viewing films, which are merely seen "as an almost literal model of imaginative and unconscious mental processes." (Pearson & Simpson, 2000)

Furthermore, imitation at the phonological level usually occurs after numerous repetitions of the same utterances. Terminologically, the term "repetition can be seen as a particular kind of imitation, one that is often associated with language." (Saxton, 2010)

Phonologically, today's children are very sharp in grabbing catchy lines from the moving media and later on acting it out and even incorporating it in their play. It is really amazing seeing how kids play with their vocal cord to adjust the tone and accent of the following utterances to copy their Bollywood heroes,

- Majhi sataki re! (Singham, 2011)
- Son of Sardar ... (Son of Sardar, 2012)
- Aal Izz Well (3 Idiots, 2009)
- "Ek baar jo maine committement kardi, us ke baad toh mein khud ki bhi nahi sunta". (Wanted, 2009)
- Ra ra Rowdy Rathore... (Rowdy Rathore, 2012)
- Don Ko Pakadna Mushkil Hi Nahi Namumkin Hai (Don, 2006)
- Khiladi bhaiya khiladi bhaiyya khiladi (Khiladi 786, 2012)
- Ae Mamu! (Munna Bhai M.B.B.S., 2003)

Some other popular phrases from cartoon characters, where kids usually copies the regional accents, such as Chhotu Bheem, the "little boy in a dhoti from an imaginary Indian village called Dholakpur, has caught the fancy of kids all over India. The protagonist is a child with exceptional physical strength supported by quirky characters, simple plot lines, silly gags and tongue-in-cheek dialogues." (Udiaver, 2011)

- Jam Jam Jam Boora

- Maharaj ki jai ho
- Come come...

Another example of multilingual accents can be seen in the cartoon Motu Patlu, which a "new rib-tickling comedy that cuts across all age groups. The show brings alive the classic comic stars Motu-Patlu and has stories that are deeply rooted in India." (Box Office India, 2012)

- Aare baba
- Chingam ke changul se Bachna Impossible bole to em-possible
- Furfuri Nagariya

In fact, studies have shown that imitating an accent makes it easier to hear what the person is saying to you. Establishing a common ground between two people, even if one person is "putting an accent on" helps people from mixing up similar-sounding words and identify words that might otherwise be pronounced unrecognizably. If one person has gotten a feel for the differences in pronunciation, it takes less processing power in their brain to understand what's being said to them, and the verbal exchange is more fluid. (Arkell, 2012)

The influences of media on the lexical development of kids can be illustrated when the latter are attentively "viewing an engaging television program, frequently laughing at appropriate points and repeating parts of the ongoing dialogue." (Singer, 2001) Chomsky suggested that "a child may pick up a large part of his vocabulary and feel the sentence structure from television." (1959:42)

How many times we come across children uttering dialogues, from the famous Japanese cartoon Doreamon when they are interacting with their peer,

- main tumko hypnotize karuga
- outerspace mein jayenge
- time machine
- ab tum nahi bachoge
- kya tum meri madad nai karoge?
- tum hamesha aise hi karte ho
- Main ghar aa gaya !
- Ab bas bhi karo

Hence, "when children construct language rules, they are attempting to find rules or patterns that account for the language used by others in their presence. It is as if they were carefully feeling and probing the language to find its joints and seams, its outer shape and its inner workings." (Temple et al; 1993) It is amazing to notice that word learning or vocabulary acquisition, where children either learned something new about words or extended their understandings of familiar words through TV sessions and how they utilize such knowledge in appropriate situations.

To further understand the influences of media on the linguistic aspect of children, we also need to pay attention to their non-verbal communication skills, which includes facial expressions, gestures, dressing sense and emotional responses.

Kids usually imitate all the grimaces of Mr. Bean, blinking eyes, making funny faces or giving odd expressions. The omnipresence of music in the Indian society leads children to follow the signature dance steps of their favorite actors and it takes them no time to copy the action sequels as well. Kids are crazy about clothes and accessories with the print of their beloved cartoon characters such as Ben 10, Dora, Mickey, Doraemon and so on. While watching cartoon/movie, kids exhibit emotional responses like hugging their parents on seeing similar scenes on TV, saying "Mom," "Dad" and similarly, the serial *Ek Veer Ki Ardaas...Veera*, which is based on the unconditional brother-sister love is very popular nowadays among siblings who copies their fights and sacrifices. Even in their unconscious imitation, gender differences can

be highlighted at such a young age, where boys will be crazy about Chota Bheem, Ben 10 and girls will be after the ever-green Barbie, Dora.

One of the positive aspects of media's effects on children is that the glamorous world is giving them good opportunities to grow artistically, in movies and on Indian Television through various reality shows. In fact, "Bollywood had nurtured several child actors who through their innocent performances and cute appearances won the hearts of the audiences." (www.movieplus.com, 2012)

India is "one of the largest centres of film production in the world" (Jha, 2005), which has a variety of cartoons, movies, documentaries in terms of contents, genres and languages. While Bollywood is reaching the global market, the child's cinema is also growing tremendously, with authentic script and brilliant child's artists, which are altogether compelling our children to be attracted towards them. Movies like *Chillar Party* (2011), based on "a subtle story about a gang of innocent children who stand up against a politician and save a street dog's life. The film tugged at many hearts as children enjoyed it for its fun moments and the elders appreciated for its message on the class difference in Indian society." (India Today Online, 2011) The song "Tai tai Phish" and the promotional one-liners went viral among kids, who were copying the dance steps and dialogues. This movie is also symbolic as each child in the society can identify himself with any of the characters as the latter comes from various cultural and financial backgrounds. Some other popular films are *Koi Mila Gaya* (2003), *Bhootnath* (2008) and award winning movies like *Halo* (1996), *The Blue Umbrella* (2007), *Taare Zameen Par* (2007), *Stanley Ka Dabba* (2011).

Cartoons can be entertaining as well as a source of learning. "In the past decade, filmmakers have tried to cater to children with animation projects like "My Friend Ganesha", "Bal Ganesh", "Hanuman", "Hanuman Returns" and "Ghatotkach"." (India Today Online, 2011) Moreover, socialization as a result of mass media starts at approximately the age of 2, in the form of television. Some children's television programmes are designed to socialize the audience, for example *Barney & Friends* where the children are presented with everyday situations and demonstrations on the correct way to react in these reactions. Some other cartoons are interactive based, where they build a communication with the children, with questions and answers such as *Dora The Explorer*, *Mickey Mouse Clubhouse & Go Diego Go*, some famous lines from these cartoons are

- Kahan? ... Yahan!
- Diego keeps a running dialogue with viewers, actively encouraging them to run, jump, clap, cheer, sing in English and Spanish, and help him on his animal adventures, to investigate, solve problems, call to animals, or identify their habitats.

Another noting positive effect is that through these unconscious imitations, the child gains confidence and gets rid of stage fear, which helps him to meet the requirement of the school's curriculum, where he has to perform on special days in front of a crowd. In addition, as kids are having almost similar access to media, they can mingle well in groups, thus developing their interpersonal as well as intercultural behaviour.

However, on the other hand, we do have certain drawbacks too. Firstly, usually it is found that when a movie/cartoon is running successfully in theatres/TV, kids will put on acts from it among their friends or even parents will ask them to perform in front of their guests to either bring humour or display the child's abilities. They are highly proud with such performances from their prodigies, ultimately, encouraging them to follow the path of such characters. Later, on other occasions, when the same kids are copying embarrassing phrases, for example, from the cartoon:

- [bounding on a door] It's not fair... aaaahhhh (Horrid Henry)
- [repeated Line] NANA NANANAAA (Horrid Henry)
- baccho ko kidnap karne wali aurat (Shin Chan)
- mitsi aise baccho jasi harkatein karna band kardo (Shin Chan)
- tum ek matlabi aurat ho mitsie! (Shin Chan)
- Mom, us aurat ki figure tumse jyaada acchi hai... (Shin Chan)
- Action kamin!!!! (Shin Chan)

Then, the same parents will scold them and stop them from doing so. As a result, children are confused and are not able to meet common sense, as out of ignorance they are just imitating without truly know its meaning or its effects.

The number of kids-based reality shows we are having today is also a matter of concerned. All these are promoting children's towards imitating their idols as well as developing their potentials/talents but somewhere with all the tough competition and hectic schedule, these kids are losing their innocence and time for studies. In fact, with the growing popularity of child-based reality shows, lots of pressure is being put on children to imitate the dance, song or act from movies. It is a money making industry together with the support of parents which is destroying the innocence of children. Sometimes, the child is pushed to put on acts which are not appropriate for their age. A further vital psychological aspect is the feeling of failure, kids spent tremendous time, energy and effort in their performances and when they failed to at-

tain perfection, it is heartbreaking to see them in tears.

The current lifestyle is also to blame, where both parents are working and living in a nuclear family, the child has less time to interact and even (apart the school) socialize with other kids. In addition, the high cost of living has restricted couples to have only one child, ultimately, the latter considers the idiot box as his best friend. Unfortunately, parents usually use the TV as a nanny after a stressful working day, thus leaving the child open to all sort of influences. Thus, "for children, television had become a major socializing agent." (Newman, 1995)

To conclude, as the moving media "is transformed to a digital medium [...] we believe that it is the utmost importance to adopt policies that maximizes children's exposure to beneficial programming and minimize exposure to programming that is harmful." (Odom et al; 2007) Parents should be encouraged to teach their wards "media literacy", which Ofcom (2004) defines as "the ability to access, understand and create communications in a variety of contexts". It is also crucial for kids to understand that these images are unrealistic and unattainable. In fact, parents can make a concerted effort to lessen the negative effects that might have on the developing adults' self-esteem by encouraging them to question and analyze what they see on TV and educating them about reality. (Jusoff, 2009). Finally, "as children face different developmental tasks, media are likely to have a greater or lesser effect depending on the specific issues the children are facing at that time." (Gentile & Sesma, 2003)

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