

THE REPRESENTATION OF SPEECH DISORDERS IN FILM

by

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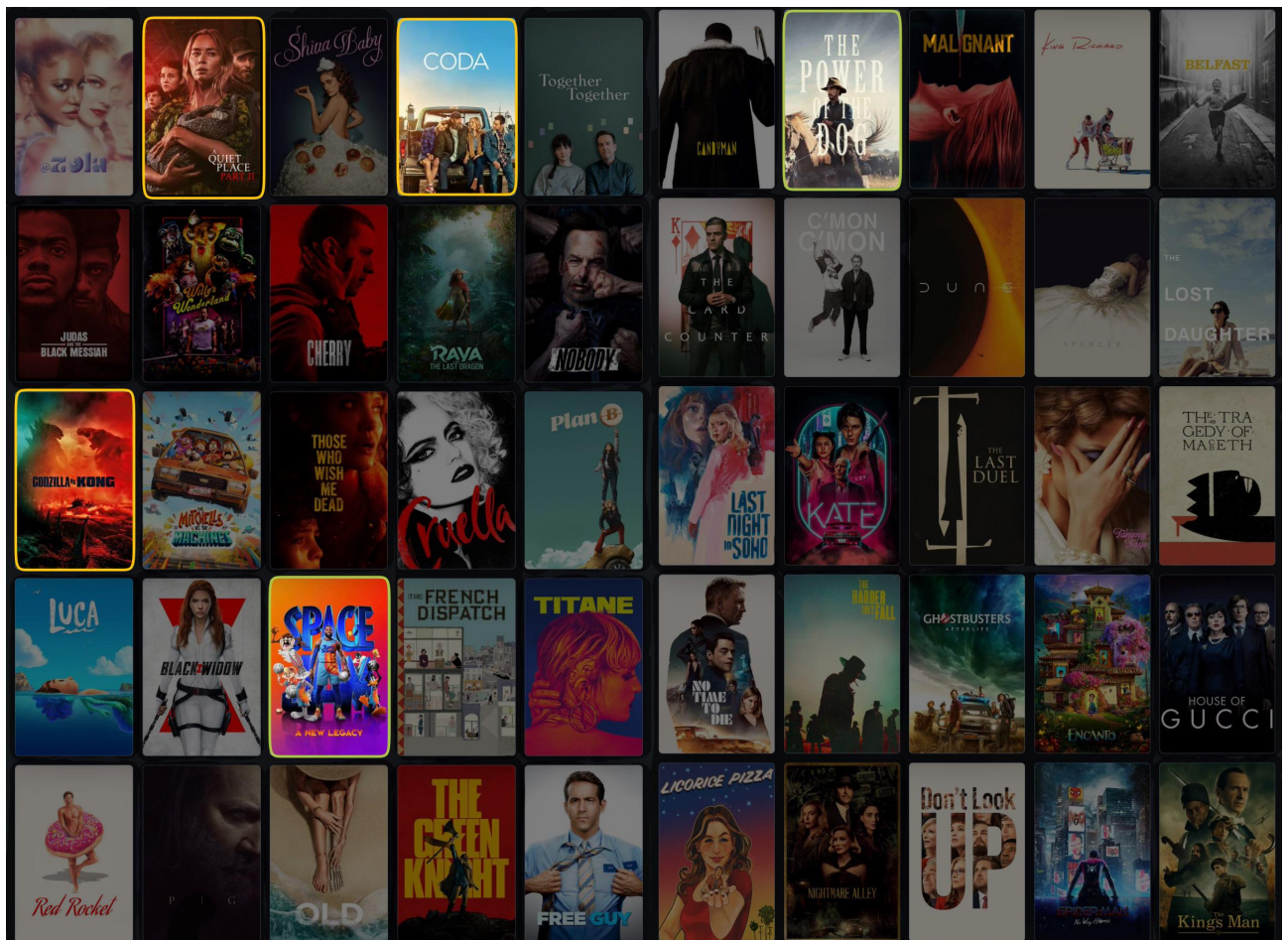
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ABSTRACT

A speech disorder can be defined as any condition in which a person has trouble creating speech sounds or difficulty with communication. For example, an individual with a stutter may have disfluencies in speech flow or disordered speech patterns. The representation of marginalized groups within the film industry has come a long way, but we are far from where we need to be. In the spring of 2022, I watched the top 50 movies of 2021 according to the public opinion, cultural impact, and the Academy, the group in charge of choosing who and what is nominated for the Oscars. After studying speech-language pathology these past 2 years in school, I was genuinely interested in how many of these films would depict a character with a communication disorder. . I watched each film to see if there was a character with a stutter, a lisp or any kind of communication disorder. I found that of the top 50 movies of 2021, only 2 had characters with communication disorders.

Background

The representation of marginalized groups within the film industry has come a long way. For women, the past 5-10 years have had a major shift. To ensure this, the Bechdel test was created. Based on a comic strip published in 1985, the film must include two named women characters that have a conversation about something other than a man. These three rules are “used as a way to track the active presence of women in films and fiction and target the issue of gender inequality” (Kravina, 2022). Using this as inspiration, I was interested in seeing how people with speech disorders are portrayed. In the spring of 2022, I watched the top 50 movies of 2021 according to the public opinion, cultural impact, and the Academy, the group in charge of choosing who and what is



nominated for the Oscars. An individual is only invited to be in this group by earning a nomination or by being sponsored by two active Academy members from the same branch. After studying speech-language pathology these past 2 years in school, I was genuinely interested in how many of these films would depict a character with a communication disorder. A communication disorder can be described as any difficulty in communication or oral motor function. I watched each film to see if there was a character with a stutter, a lisp or any kind of communication disorder. I found that of the top 50 movies of 2021, only 2 had characters with communication disorders.

A speech disorder can be defined as any condition in which a person has trouble creating speech sounds or difficulty with communication. For example, an individual with a stutter may have disfluencies in speech flow or disordered speech patterns. Other individuals may have apraxia of speech (knowing what one wants to say but having difficulty articulating), Dysarthria (slurred speech), a lisp (when an individual makes the 'th' sound while trying to make the 's' sound), Spasmodic Dysphonia (voice spasms of the vocal cords), Cluttering (a speech disfluency), Muteness or selective mutism, aphasia (a disorder caused by damage to the brain's language capabilities) or a number of other ways their divergent speech patterns affect their lives (U.S. Department). These disorders affect millions of people in a variety of ways, yet there is very little representation within the media, but the way they are portrayed varies. Nearly 8% of Americans from the ages 3-17 have some sort of speech language disorder; that is equal to every 1 in 12 children (U.S. Department). Moreover, in the same article, it states that 17.9 million adults report having some sort of issue with their voice within the last 12 months and 9.4 million reported the issue lasting longer than that. Individuals with speech-language disorders

are a minority group often forgotten, most likely because the thing that makes them different cannot normally be seen. There is a possibility that people in the film industry may find it difficult to work with these individuals or may believe that viewers do not want to watch them on screen. To be clear, people who are Deaf do not have a communication disorder. These individuals use a language that does not require verbalization and, most likely, would not identify with having disordered speech. Overall, this semester I wanted to see how people with communication disorders and those who are Deaf are portrayed in films.

Of the 50 movies I watched, there were several that depicted Deaf people in a positive light. Firstly, in *A Quiet Place pt II*, one of the main characters is a Deaf girl. The character, Regan Abbott played by Millicent Simmonds, has been Deaf since birth and, in a way, saves her family because of it. This is important because there is a difference between being deaf, being Deaf and just knowing sign language. For example, we may “use the lowercase deaf when referring to the audiological condition of not hearing” (community and culture). This means a deaf person may be hard of hearing or identify with hearing individuals. A Deaf person will identify as Deaf, and most likely grew up in a Deaf household or grew up around Deaf culture. In the same article, they clarified we can use the term Deaf when “referring to a particular group of deaf people who share a language – American Sign Language (ASL) – and a culture”. When the world is taken over by monsters and all



humans must remain silent to avoid triggering these monsters, the Abbott family is at an advantage because they are all fluent in American Sign Language. On top of her character being brave and a hero to her family, Millicent Simmonds is Deaf in real life. In an interview with *Variety*, when asked about hearing actors playing Deaf roles, Simmonds states “I think it’s not realistic, and it’s not fair to the talent out there who aren’t chosen because of their disability. That doesn’t make sense to me” (Nichols 2021). Simmonds is one of the first people of our generation to play a role depicting her own story, in one way or another. Hollywood has historically done a poor job with hiring people from outside minority groups to play minority characters, but now that there is a standard set, this provides hope that there can be real change.

Similarly, the movie *CODA* made history. *CODA* is a movie about a Deaf family and their daughter that was born hearing and is a Child Of Deaf Adults (CODA), hence the film title. The main character, Ruby Rossi (played by Emilia Jones) has two Deaf parents, a Deaf brother, and a passion for singing. She has trouble finding a place to belong that pleases her family and friends, all while making her feel fulfilled. This film broke records by having the first Deaf man to win an Oscar (Troy Kotsur, who plays Frank Rossi, Ruby’s dad) and by winning best picture, and being the first primarily Deaf cast to do so. “There were many incidental, probably unscripted moments that were authentic because the Deaf roles were all filled with Deaf characters, and the



actors also provided feedback re: their own experiences,” Fischtrom Beacom, a Deaf activist, told the Today show (Todayshow 2022). Using actors that know the background of the character that they are playing without doing superficial research, it changes the film on an award-winning level.

Lastly, in the film *Godzilla vs. Kong*, there is a deaf character who forms a bond with King Kong and is often tasked with calming him down when he is upset. The actor of this character, Kaylee Hottle, comes from an all Deaf family and is Deaf herself. In an interview with The Daily Moth, a media page that focuses on top stories, Deaf news, and Deaf humor delivered in ASL, Hottle was asked about how translations went on set. She says “I was fine with memorizing the script and signing my lines, but the tough part was signing out the ‘spoken’ parts because we had to change it, and sometimes they’d tell us it was wrong but they didn’t understand that ASL changed almost everything” (Hovan 2021). The disconnect created by a language barrier, which seems like an easily avoidable problem. Many individuals might assume ASL is simply signing words in English, but it is a completely different language. There are different grammatical rules you have to follow and an entire culture that goes with it. When working on Deaf characters, casting Deaf actors is important, but someone closely related to the culture needs to be involved. Deafness is not a tool for character development, or a way to give characters depth. A Deaf person should have been involved in the writing process, to flush out any discrepancies. “There was one instance where there was a



misunderstanding between us related to the ASL translation, which caused a delay but they later understood.”, Hottle quotes in the same interview (Hovan 2021). When asked about what was challenging on set, the young actress mentions she was in charge of teaching the cast to sign. She says, “They had never interacted with a Deaf person before. I had to explain how to sign and use facial expressions. That was the hard part, but when they picked up on it, it was fine” (Hovan 2021).

Of the movies that did have a character with a communication disorder, the first one is *The Power of the Dog*, directed by Jane Campion. The movie was adapted from the 1967 semi-autobiographical novel by Thomas Savage. *The Power of the Dog* is the story of two brothers, Phil (Benedict Cumberbatch) and George Burbank (Jesse Plemons), who own a cattle ranch. One day, the crew visits an inn and George takes a liking to Rose Gordon (Kirsten Dunst) and they later marry. Rose moves onto the ranch with her sensitive son, Peter (Kodi Smit-McPhee). Phil bullies Peter relentlessly for his lisp and meek manner, while terrorizing Rose, which drives her to drink. One day, Peter stumbles upon Phil’s collection of nude men’s magazines, and the pair form an interesting bond. Phil makes a braided rope for Peter and takes him on solo horse riding lessons. On one of these lessons, Peter collects a diseased calf’s hide (knowing it was diseased due to his studies in school), claiming he wants to collect hides to be like Phil. On a separate trip, Phil deeply wounds his hand while working on a fence. When they get home, Phil promises to work on making Peter’s rope all through the night,



unknowingly using the diseased hide, with his wounded hand. Phil quickly dies from anthrax poisoning. Peter does not attend the funeral but is looking out his window as his newly sober mother and George come out of the car smiling. This scene leads us to believe that Peter purposely poisoned Phil in order to save his mother. In the film, it is clear that Peter, the stuttering, small, sensitive kid with a lisp is seen as weak and unwelcome. According to Speech Pathologists, Julie A. Daymut and Kevin Stuckey, a “lisp” usually refers to a person’s difficulty producing the /s/ and /z/ sounds because of incorrect tongue placement (SuperDuper 2009). The tongue may be sticking out between the front teeth, or the sides of the tongue may not be high enough or tense enough in the mouth. Both of these articulation errors result in sound distortions.” In the first dinner scene, Phil mocks Peter’s lisp and this is one of the first interactions the pair have. Peter’s lisp is meant to make him look feeble and incapable. A lisp is very common for young children and is not rare for people in Peter’s age range either (a young adult in college). Estimates suggest as “many as 23% of the patients SLPs see struggle with lisping disorders of varying levels of severity” (lisping 2022). In the same article, they mention that “Lisps are also one of the most-often portrayed speech disorders in popular media: from Drew Barrymore, whose barely perceptible lisp is mild if not a little cute, to Sylvester the Cat and Daffy Duck’s less-than-sensitive and completely cartoonish portrayals of severe and dramatic lisping”. It is not uncommon for a lisp in a child, specifically a young girl, to be seen as cute. This further alienates Peter from the cowboys, and makes him look feminine. In the end, Peter outwits the man in charge with his charm. Phil becomes fond of Peter and is insistent on finishing the rope for him, despite his injured hand. Speaking as a person who has been taught about lisps, but has

not had one, I believe this representation is not inaccurate. Considering that this film takes place in 1925, it makes sense that the character would have to endure bullying due to his communication disorder. The film was nominated for 12 Oscars but only won best director for Jane Campion. This film does not portray lisp-speaking individuals in a positive light, but I think it would be interesting to read, annotate and analyze the novel the book is based on. This would be a great way to cross-examine Peter's personality and characterization on the page compared to on the screen.

Space Jam: A New Legacy is a new-aged take on the original *Space Jam* starring Michael Jordan. In this film, LeBron James and his son, Dom, get sucked into a video game and have to play each other in a basketball game. Dom is the creator of the game, so he creates his all-star team based on real-life all-star players. LeBron must explore the Warner Brothers multiverse to find members for his team. He eventually collects all of the 'Toon Squad' (Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, Lola Bunny, Porky Pig, and other iconic Warner Brothers characters) and they use each of their goofy strong points to take down the bad guys. The Looney Toons characters are known for their goofy demeanor and distinct voices. Bugs Bunny takes a primary role on the team. He is in charge of finding all of the teammates from various places in "toonland" and helps lead them to victory. His primary speech error is called rhotacism, or when the /R/ sound is replaced with the /W/ sound. For example, he would say "wabbit" instead of "rabbit". Bugs was originally voiced by Mel Blanc who later voiced several of the Toons over the years. Porky Pig is infamous for his



stutter. A stutter can be defined as a problem with fluency. Interestingly, the first voice actor of the porky pig character was a person who stuttered. The man's name was Joseph Tapley Dougherty, or Joe Dougherty. Dougherty was speaking naturally while recording lines for Porky Pig, but was ultimately recast due to his inability to control his speech. Dougherty worked on this role from 1935 to 1937 until Mel Blanc took over the role from 1937 to 1989. This transition occurred because the project did not have enough funding to keep up with the hours it would take to record his lines. They replaced Dougherty with a man who does not stutter, but kept this trait on the character for what some people view as comedic effect. While they did not know it back then, this ableism has somewhat of a butterfly effect. They fired a man who stuttered, but kept the stuttering character. This is an example of producers taking a distinct trait from a minority group and profiting on it, without paying tribute to the group they took it from. After Bugs, Porky Pig may be the most popular toon and has made the creator a lot of money through collectables. Joe Dougherty was an important part of making the character such an icon and he is lost within the character's history. Daffy Duck is primarily used as comedic relief. While each member of the 'Toon Squad' helps with their ultimate victory, Daffy plays the role of "coach". Daffy has a more dramatized version of a lisp. In Mel Blanc's book, he states the character has this impediment because "It seemed to me that such an extended mandible would hinder his speech, particularly on words containing an *s* sound. Thus 'despicable' became 'desth-picable.'" Although, according to some, Daffy's lateral lisp was modeled after the producer Leon Schlesinger's tendency to lisp. One of the more popular theories is that Mel Blanc created all of these different voices in order to make

his characters sound distinct. The looney toons speech disorders do not directly play a part of their individual personalities, but rather set them apart from the other toons.

In a discussion post I found, some people were theorizing that these characters are animals, and that is why they cannot perfectly enunciate (u/sorryaboutthat1time 2017). Bugs Bunny has buck teeth, Daffy has a bill, and these animal parts were not made, or drawn, for human speech. Another person mentioned that these characters are from rural areas without radio or TV access, and speech norms have not yet been established. All of these theories are interesting to think about, but at the end of the day these are real problems people struggle with their whole lives. I think it's better we move away from "representation" based on such bold stereotypes and try to create multi-dimensional characters representing wide ranges and backgrounds. The Looney Toons are considered a "classic" that many generations grew up with back in the day, which creates sentimental value for some, but it is still important to recognize that these characters are not perfect. My research question is: How do people who identify as having a communication disorder view the portrayal of people with communication disorders in film?

Method

Participant

I interviewed one adult who identifies as having a communication disorder born in the 1970s. The adult signed a consent form to participate in the research study. One other adult born in the 1990s agreed to participate in the study but they did not participate because of time constraints. I also reviewed publicly available comments that were made on YouTube in the Comments section of video posts.

Procedure

I asked the participant a series of open ended questions and audio recorded the interview to later gather quotes and data. During the interview I asked the following open ended questions: Have you ever seen a character within media (ex: movies, tv, books, etc.) that had a similar experience regarding your communication disorder? Who was this character? When was this?

What are your thoughts on the looney toon's and their communication disorders? What are your thoughts on actors without communication disorders portraying people with communication disorders in movies?

Results

I had the pleasure of having a discussion with a person who stuttered and got their opinion on the Loony Toons and the overall impact that speech disorders in film have had on their life. In our interview, they mentioned that they were first exposed to Looney Toons around elementary age. They commented that it seems to them that people who stutter are, “typically show[n to be] someone who is weak, someone who has emotional problems, someone who is untrustworthy or someone who has some kind of a cognitive delay”. In films “they make it[stuttering] a critical part of them that presents them as having a fundamental... flaw in their character, their cognitive ability”. They have had such an overall negative experience that they felt that “to go seek out films would be self destructive”. Simply put, for this individual, speech disorders in film are a portrayal of reality that they do not accept. On the other hand, in the comments of a youtube video talking about the Looney Toons' communications disorders, I found several people found the characters comforting. One person shared, “characters like this always meant a lot to

me, not only because I can relate to them, but because they show that those who struggle with things that most people don't can and will still be loved. ” (vballforever).

Based on the interview and publicly available comments, I can tell that for some individuals, these characters mean a lot to them on a personal level. It can be comforting to see a character you can relate to on screen, especially when you feel isolated or ostracized because of something that makes you different.

Conclusion

All in all, representation for people with speech language disorders still has a ways to go. As a woman of color, I feel like I am just starting to see accurate representations for girls who look and talk like me. Although we are all anxious to see minority groups get the representation they deserve, this is not something we should rush. On this topic, we need quality over quantity. It is better for film distribution companies to take their time making high quality films with fully developed characters, rather than just put out what is easiest.

Discussion

People with communication disorders are not a homogeneous group. Different people can have different perceptions of the same film. Like other people from marginalized groups, there are differences in how one views their own abilities. This is important for consumers of film, actors in films, and producers of films to consider as they begin to include people with communication disorders. Understanding the group you are portraying and how that group feels about your portrayal of them are necessary to ensure that people with communication disorders are portrayed in a realistic and positive

light, not as weak or cognitively impaired. Many films are based on books, and it would be interesting to read the original story, and see how the characterization compares.

Future Studies

In the future, I would like to go back to the year 2001 and look at the top 50 films from that year and follow a similar procedure. Considering films like *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* with stuttering Professor Quirrell, It would be interesting to see how things have changed within that 20 year period. Reading the books off of which some of these films are based is also something I would like to research in the future.

Additionally, interviewing more individuals with communication disorders to get their perspective on how people like them are portrayed will inform both the film industry and the field of communication disorders.

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