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LEXICAL CHOICES AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER IN MALAYSIAN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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The process children go through when learning about gender roles is an essential part of their knowledge construction. This acquired knowledge helps them learn about their roles in society. However, problems occur when children are presented with stereotypical constructions of masculinity and femininity that may inhibit their development. Thus, children's literature must be evaluated to uncover gendered messages. While overtly sexist messages in children's stories can be easily identified, the more subtle nuances of language require careful analysis. This paper begins by stressing the urgent need to evaluate Malaysian children's literature published in the English language. By distinguishing between "overt" and "covert" sexism in children's literature, we argue that the role of language in messages about gender identity in children's literature must be emphasised. Based on a selection of Malaysian children's literature, we attempt an analysis of lexical items that construct gender roles and identities, and we use computer-based programmes to reveal how power relations are established between males and females.

Keywords: lexical choices, gender construction, Malaysian children's literature, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), covert markers, stereotyping

INTRODUCTION

The renewed emphasis in Malaysian education policies on the importance of mastering the English language has led to a significant rise in the publication of Malaysian children's books in English. In addition to the popular children's stories from the West that have long been available in bookstores in Malaysia, publishers have begun introducing locally published children's books in English. Desai (2006) cautions that the marked rise in this type of publication is a cause for concern, as the quality of these books varies considerably. This observation signals the need for comprehensive research on Malaysia's output of children's literature. It is imperative that the quality of these local publications be assessed; they are an important tool for the transmission of knowledge. Because young children are the consumers of these texts, a quality evaluation must include an examination of gender construction in children's books (Dutro, 2002).

THE IMPORTANCE OF READING GENDER IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

The process children go through when constructing their gender roles is an important part of their knowledge construction. In fact, gender is considered "the basic dimension" through which children identify their place in society (Taylor, 2003: 310). Children are innately guided by their cognitive processes to see gender as a criterion that determines their social behaviour (Bem, 1993: 112). Therefore, it would be inaccurate to assume that children are merely "passive recipients of adult instruction". Instead, they are "cognitive constructivists" who are constantly classifying and categorising the world around them (Bem, 1993: 112).

Children absorb a considerable amount of information in their impressionable early years, and this contributes to the development of their social identities (Drees and Phye, 2001: 49). From a very young age, children learn to use gender as a way to differentiate people and categorise the world around them, and this affects all aspects of their lives (Smith, Cowie and Blades, 2003: 177). As noted by Desai (2001) and Gooden and Gooden (2001), children's books play an important role in helping young children in this process of identifying and categorising

gender roles. When these books portray stereotyped gender images, they can adversely affect children's notions of what it means to be female or male (Taylor, 2003: 302). Bradford (2007) concurs and stresses that when evaluating children's books, attention must be paid to messages about gender construction because they affect identity construction in young children. Particular attention must be paid to the identity of characters in the texts that depict oversimplified gender-role stereotypes, which may contribute to establishing and reinforcing sexist attitudes (Christie, 2000: 12).

Researchers have concluded that gender-stereotyped behaviour in children's literature can be transmitted through both the written text and through the accompanying illustrations (Poarch and Monk-Turner, 2001). This is a matter of concern because stereotyping has a "reductive tendency" through which certain traits are deliberately emphasised and exaggerated while others are suppressed (Talbot, 2003: 468).

OVERT AND COVERT MARKERS OF SEXISM IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

In the past, many feminist social science studies on children's literature depended on a content analysis of texts in which overt, outwardly visible markers of sexism were counted (Eisenberg, 2002; Rosa, 1999; Goodroe, 1998; Turner-Bowker, 1996; Crabb and Bielawski, 1994). These overt markers included the frequency with which female characters appeared as main characters in texts compared to male characters or the frequency with which female characters appeared in the accompanying illustrations in comparison to male characters. These studies relied on liberal feminism, a branch of feminist studies commonly used to examine equity issues. Liberal feminism is grounded in the theoretical assumption of a male-dominant society and seeks ways to create a better place in society for women (Yeaman et al., 1996: 19).

Following the liberal feminist approach of these early studies, subsequent researchers have aligned themselves with the field of poststructural feminism. In contrast to liberal feminists, these researchers contend that the position of women in society can be better served through political and economic changes than through social changes alone. Furthermore, such changes can only be realised by

understanding the varied social mechanisms that convince people to adopt and act from particular points of view (Yeaman et al., 1996: 20). Central to a poststructural feminist approach to research is the foregrounding of language, the element emphasised by Critical Discourse analysts (henceforth, CD analysts) in their research. In fact, Mills (2004: 118) describes Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth, CDA) as an approach that views language as "a central vehicle" through which "people are constituted as individuals and as social subjects".

The importance of considering language in the study of gender representation in children's literature is emphasised by Clark (2002: 292), who calls on researchers of children's texts to pay greater attention to "nuances of expression" and "a variety of voices" when reading gender in children's literature. In effect, this is a call to pay greater attention to the covert markers of sexism manifested through the subtle use of language, as suggested by poststructural feminists.

Several studies on gender construction in children's literature have adopted a poststructuralist approach. Bradford (1998) relied on poststructural feminism when she examined encoded gender ideologies in children's stories of family relationships. Similarly, Hubler (2000) used this approach to examine a selection of children's texts and demonstrated the subtle ways in which fiction allows readers to identify social structures. When looking at the role of language in children's literature, Knowles and Malmkjaer (1996: 69) paid particular attention to the concept of "collocation": "the tendency of certain words in spoken and written texts to appear in the vicinity of certain other words". Grounded in a poststructural approach, these authors suggested that when certain words are seen and heard frequently enough, members of a common linguistic community begin to associate these words with certain meanings. They cautioned that some of our linguistic habits may perpetuate stereotypes that may be damaging to some groups in society.

CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

CDA is a research approach that looks at the "impact of the systematic choices of particular language items or grammatical construction within a text" and, as such, offers an ideal exploratory platform for a study on language and gender (Mills, 2004: 119). For this reason, this study

adopts CDA for reading gender construction in Malaysian children's literature.

Discourse, a central concept in CDA, is viewed as a series of "complex communicative events" represented through texts and talk (van Dijk, 2003: 356). Discourse constructs social identities and legitimates these identities to produce social norms (Allan, 2003: 46). This definition of discourse calls on CD analysts to focus on concrete features of language to uncover distributions of power (Mills, 2004: 119).

Within discourse analysis, CDA adopts the most explicitly political stance through its deliberate goal of addressing inequalities in society (Kress, 1996; van Dijk, 2001). CDA "critically" takes a stand against injustice "as it is expressed, signalled, constituted, legitimised and so on by language use" (Wodak, 2001: 2). By applying suitable linguistic tools, CDA aims to reveal ideology that is "normally hidden through the habitualisation of discourse" (Fowler, 1991: 89). Therefore, language is "a primary force for the production and reproduction of ideology" (Bucholtz, 2003: 57).

Simply put, ideology refers to the assumptions that guide our most common social practices (Fairclough, 2002: 152). An ideology is a social belief system that is so rarely questioned that it becomes a part of the shared practices that guide our everyday existence (Bucholtz, 2003: 57). Social beliefs about what it means to be male or female are therefore a part of our shared ideology.

Shared knowledge of gender roles is so ingrained and unchallenged that it informs our "sense-making practices" (McKee, 2003: 48). Shared assumptions about gender roles typically reflect socially accepted distinctions between women and men. Unfortunately, this often leads to limited opportunities and the exclusion of women from whole areas of social participation, rendering them the powerless other (Bing and Bergvall, 1996: 16). This practice, which is detrimental to the female gender, is commonly referred to as stereotyping.

The practice of stereotyping involves the reduction of "the three-dimensional quality of the real to a one-dimensional and distorted form" (Macdonald, 1995: 13). Feminists argue that women are largely subjected to stereotyping, and this recurring practice in mainstream

discourse renders women powerless. Therefore, examining stereotyping practices involves examining power relations between males and females in society. CDA defines social power in terms of control and assumes that those with power "control the acts and minds" of those who lack power (van Dijk, 2003: 354). When power is established through "norms, habits and even a quiet general consensus", hegemony is established (van Dijk, 2003: 355). Social tolerance of stereotyping practices, evident in many facets of Malaysian public discourse, reflects the hegemony of sexism.

Stereotyping practices in texts targeted at children can adversely affect both girls and boys. However, girls are often most affected by stereotyped images that deter them from realising their fullest potential (Fox, 1993). Hunt (1999: 1) describes children's books as "the province of that culturally marginalised species, the female". In a study that reviewed a sample of children's books over a 20-year period (1967–1987), Peterson and Lach (1990) found disparities in the representation of female characters and concluded that such representation could adversely affect young children. More recently, Desai's (2006) study of a selection of Malaysian children's literature in English also revealed the stereotyping of female characters. She noted that the female characters were stereotypically depicted as mothers, housewives or teachers instead of the multitude of other roles available to women in Malaysian society.

Stereotyped images in children's stories reflect decisions to construct male and female characters differently. Language plays a subtle and significant role in this construction. Johnstone (2003) asserted that when analysing a narrative text, the question of whether the characters in the texts could have said those words or the narrator could have heard those thoughts supports the argument that linguistic choices, conscious or otherwise, are made to depict female and male characters in a particular way.

METHOD

When analysing gender representations in children's literature, researchers in countries like the United States often focus on award-winning books, which are most likely to enjoy the widest readership (Gooden and Gooden, 2001; Goodroe, 1998; Dougherty and Engel,

1987). Unfortunately, selecting a corpus of award-winning books for the present study was not possible at the time texts were being selected because the tradition of giving awards for children's books in Malaysia was still very new, and very few books had received awards. The first awards for children's books were given out in 2006 by the Malaysian chapter of the International Board of Books for Young People (Suzilawati Abdul Hamid, pers. comm.).

Texts were selected based on a set of specific criteria used to define "Malaysian children's literature for young children". The text-selection process was guided by two general guidelines, although exceptions to these guidelines were later made to ensure that the corpus was large enough to merit a comprehensive study. The two primary guidelines were as follows:

1. The texts should be written by Malaysians.
2. The texts should reflect a "Malaysian" setting in terms of characters and location.

The Texts Should Be Written by Malaysians

The first guideline was informed by Vethamani's (2001, 2004) definition of Malaysian literature in English. In a bibliography compilation of Malaysian literature in English, Vethamani (2001: iv) describes the texts listed in his book as "literary works by Malaysians". This definition considers the author's nationality a pre-requisite for defining Malaysian literature.

Of the 69 texts (with a total word count of 40,133 running words) that make up the corpus of this study, 9 texts did not meet this general criterion. All nine texts were independent stories in a book entitled *Malaysian children's favourite stories*. The author, Kay Lyons (2004), is described in the book as having lived in Malaysia for over 30 years, suggesting that she is not a Malaysian. However, these nine texts were included in the study because the stories were popular folktales in the Malay community as well as among the various ethnic minorities of Sabah, a state in Malaysia.

The Texts Should Reflect a ''Malaysian'' Setting in Terms of Characters and Location

The second criterion was developed to eliminate locally written and published children's stories about popular western fairytales such as "Snow White" and "Cinderella". Local publishers have copyright permission to (re)write and publish these popular classics from the well-established canon of Western children's literature. This criterion was intended to weed out such texts, thereby keeping the corpus "Malaysian".

Exceptions were also made for certain texts that did not meet this criterion. In the *Asian favourite stories* series, the books were described as coming from "various Asian countries" such as China, India, Japan, Korea, and Nepal, but the specific country of origin of each particular story was not mentioned.

The texts were written by a Malaysian writer and published locally, and they reflected the effort of a local writer and her publisher to produce multicultural literature for Malaysian children. The stories in this series were therefore included in the category of Malaysian children's literature because they were written and published locally, even though the stories did not reflect a "Malaysian" setting. The major concern when including these texts in the study of Malaysian children's literature was the need for a sufficient number of texts for analysis.

Therefore, for the purpose of this study, Malaysian children's literature is defined as stories written for Malaysian children and (ideally) by Malaysian writers. In cases where the stories were written by non-Malaysians, they have obvious roots in Malaysian cultures.

Stories from other cultures can only be considered part of the genre of locally written, multicultural children's literature (and therefore part of Malaysian children's literature) if they are written and published locally. However, this study makes an exception for popular fairytales from the West that are already well-established in the canon of Western children's literature.

Despite these guidelines, selecting books for this study proved difficult because the available books included texts suitable for children across a

very broad age group. Consequently, another criterion was established to control the selection of texts:

The Texts Should Be Accompanied by Illustrations on at Least Every Other Page of the Text

This criterion was met by all the selected texts and served as an important guideline for defining the target audience of the books (Walter and March, 1993) and ensuring that the books included were aimed at young Malaysian children.

To ensure that the selected texts were targeted at young children within a similar age group, two teachers evaluated the suitability of the texts for Malaysian children between the ages of five and eight (in pre-school or the first two years of primary school). This task required the teachers to have in mind a particular type of Malaysian child. The ability of young children in Malaysia to appreciate children's literature in English varies depending on their background. Typically, a child living in an urban area has greater access to the English language and is therefore better able to understand stories in English than a child living in the rural parts of Malaysia with little access to the English language.

The teachers responsible for determining that all the texts were appropriate for Malaysian children between the ages of five and eight based their determinations on their own students in urban primary schools in the Klang Valley who used the English language outside the classroom. As parents, these teachers also drew on their experience in selecting books for their own children. After the review by both teachers, all 69 texts were deemed suitable for children in the five-to-eight-year-old age group.

The aim of the lexical analysis is to foreground lexical choices that may not normally be noticed because they have become part of our everyday consciousness (Fowler, 1991). By focusing on the evaluative adjectives used to describe the characters in the texts, we examine the ways in which lexical choices craft female and male characters in the texts. Analysing lexical items in multiple texts can be a tedious task if attempted manually. We relied on two language software programmes, Oxford Wordsmith 4.0 and CLAWS4, to aid in the analysis of the texts.

In proposing a framework for the evaluation of textbooks, Mukundan (2004) suggested the use of concordance software as part of a three-stage evaluation process. This software is made up of "integrated programmes that look at how words behave in text" (Mukundan, 2004: 122). After a comprehensive evaluation of several software programmes on the market, Mukundan (2004) determined Wordsmith 3.0 to be the most appropriate tool for analysing the content of textbooks. In the present study, an upgraded version, Oxford Wordsmith 4.0, was utilised for the linguistic analysis of the texts.

The use of this software was further determined by the analysis of the language used in children's literature by Knowles and Malmkjaer (1996: 35), who maintained that such software proves "invaluable" to researchers "in drawing conclusions about lexical relations in texts". Oxford Wordsmith 4.0 was used as one of two computer-based tools for the analysis of the selected texts.

In addition to Oxford Wordsmith 4.0, we also took advantage of an online free trial of CLAWS4 (the Constituent Likelihood Automatic Word-tagging System), developed by Lancaster University's Centre for Computer Corpus Research on Language (UCREL).

CLAWS4 has been tested in the tagging process of "100 million words of the British National Corpus" and is reported to have "consistently achieved 96%–97% accuracy" (UCREL, n.d.). This software allows the tagging of every word in a given text and identifies the parts of speech to which each word belongs. We were interested in uncovering the epithets used to describe the characters in the texts, and the CLAWS4 programme allowed for quick and accurate identification of these epithets across the multiple texts.

The "C7 tagset" was used to run the texts in the corpus (UCREL, n.d.). Once every word in the text was automatically tagged by CLAWS4, we reverted to the Microsoft Word programme to do a "find" of all adjectives that were tagged.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

With the aid of the CLAWS4 programme, a total of 166 different adjectives used in reference to the various male and female characters in the texts were identified. These are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Adjectives for describing characters by gender

Exclusively male (*n*=109)			Exclusively female (*n*=15)	Both male and female (*n*=42)	
Accursed	Active	Adopted	Beautiful	Afraid	Angry
Alert	Alone	Amazing	Beloved	Busy	Cruel
Angrier	Armed	Arrogant	Blind	Curious	Free
Ashamed	Bad	Best	Common	Frightened	Good
Big	Bigger	Black	Exhausted	Greedy	Happy
Brave	Braver	Bright	Fatter	Hardworking	Heavenly
Brilliant	Careful	Chief	Nice	Hungry	Hurt
Clever	Clumsy	Cool	Older	Impatient	Lazy
Crazy	Crueler	Cunning	Reluctant	Little	Lovely
Dangerous	Delighted	Depressed	Restless	Lucky	Mischievous
Disappointed	Dishonest	Disobedient	Smiling	Obedient	Old
Eager	Elder	Eldest	Stubborn	Overjoyed	Pleased
Embarrassed	Enormous	Evil	Tiny	Poor	Quiet
Excited	Faithful	Famous	Trapped	Sad	Scared
Fearless	Fierce	Fluffy	Unkind	Shocked	Sick
Foolish	Fortunate	Frightening		Silly	Smart
Full	Funny-looking	Furious		Surprised	Tame
Grayish	Handsome	Honest		Ugly	Upset
Hopeless	Innocent	Invisible		Weak	Wicked
Irritated	Kind	Kind-hearted		Wise	Young
Large	Little	Loud		Younger	Youngest
Mad	Male	Mighty			
Nasty	New	Not afraid			
Not greedy	Not proud	Only			
Ordinary	Outstanding	Patient			
Powerful	Proud	Puzzled			
Quick	Ready	Rich			

(*continued*)

Table 1: (*continued*)

Exclusively male (*n*=109)			Exclusively female (*n*=15)	Both male and female (*n*=42)
Richest	Safe	Senior		
Shy	Silent	Skilful		
Slow	Small	Smallest		
Speechless	Stingy	Strange		
Strong	Strongest	Stupid		
Terrible	Thankful	Thin		
Thinner	Thirsty	Tired		
Unhappy	Unlucky	Vain		
Vicious	Well-known	White		
Worried				

A total of 109 adjectives were found in reference to male characters, 15 in reference to female characters and 42 adjectives were used in reference to both male and female characters.

A contributing factor to this significantly higher number of adjectives for male characters is the fact that the male characters far outnumber the female characters in the corpus of literature. There are 150 male characters in the 69 texts in comparison to just 58 female characters. As a result, the range of descriptions for the male characters is greater. The list of adjectives in Table 1 reflects this range and establishes that children reading the selected texts would see male characters exhibiting a far greater range of traits than female characters. Children especially boys reading these texts would identify maleness with strengths as well as flaws depending on the types of adjectives used to describe male characters in the text. For example, males could be seen as "active" and "clever" as well as "ashamed" and "irritated". In contrast, children especially girls would have limited opportunities to see females associated with the same range of behaviours.

The traits reflected in the choice of adjectives associated with female and male characters help communicate socially acceptable behavioural norms to young readers. The frequency with which these words are linked to the characters also affects young children. The more often an adjective is associated with a particular gender, the more firmly established the link becomes between maleness or femaleness and

certain characteristics. The distribution of the adjectives across the corpus of 69 texts is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Adjectives describing characters by gender and frequency

	MALE			FEMALE		
	Adjective	Freq. of occurrence	Across *n* number of texts	Adjective	Freq. of occurrence	Across *n* number of texts
1	Bad	>>	1	Old	>>	2
2	Cunning	>>	1	Silly	>>	1
3	Little	>>	3	Beautiful	18	7
4	Angry	23	14	Old	17	10
5	Old	22	13	Surprised	7	6
6	Sad	15	12	Sad	6	4
7	Tired	15	13	Happy	5	4
8	Happy	13	11	Angry	3	3
9	Surprised	12	12	Young	3	3
10	Cruel	10	5	Afraid	2	2
11	Strong	10	7	Good	2	1
12	Young	10	7	Greedy	2	2
13	Brave	9	7	Hungry	2	2
14	Weak	9	2	Lovely	2	2
15	Scared	8	5	Pleased	2	1
16	Afraid	7	4	Scared	2	2
17	Clever	7	3	Shocked	2	2
18	Poor	7	7	Wicked	2	1
19	Adopted	6	1	Beloved	1	1
20	Rich	6	4	Blind	1	1
21	Shocked	6	6	Busy	1	1
22	Strongest	6	2	Common	1	1
23	Thirsty	6	3	Cruel	1	1
24	Unhappy	6	5	Curious	1	1
25	Busy	5	3	Exhausted	1	1

(*continued*)

Table 2: (*continued*)

	MALE			FEMALE		
	Adjective	Freq. of occurrence	Across *n* number of texts	Adjective	Freq. of occurrence	Across *n* number of texts
26	Fierce	5	4	Fatter	1	1
27	Frightened	5	5	Free	1	1
28	Handsome	5	4	Frightened	1	1
29	Little	5	6	Hardworking	1	1
30	Lucky	5	4	Heavenly	1	1

* >> indicates the use of an adjective as part of a compound noun that refers to a specific character in a text, for example, "Little Crab" and "Silly Porcupine".

For discussion purposes, Table 2 lists the 30 adjectives most frequently used to describe male and female characters in the selected texts. Of the comparatively smaller number of adjectives used to describe female characters, Table 2 shows that the most common adjective used to describe female characters is beautiful, appearing 18 times across 7 different texts. In contrast, male characters are referred to as handsome only five times across five texts. This comparatively greater emphasis on feminine beauty helps establish the importance of physical beauty for females. When these texts are accompanied by illustrations, they provide a very specific idea of what it means to be beautiful.

Table 2 lists adjectives such as strong, brave, clever, and rich in reference to several male characters in multiple texts. Aggressiveness is also prominently described through the use of adjectives such as angry, cruel, and fierce. Although the same adjectives are used in reference to females, their occurrence is far less frequent. For example, males are described as angry 23 times in 14 texts, while only 3 female characters are described as angry in just 3 texts. Therefore, strength, bravery and aggressiveness are assumed to be masculine traits. This is how children's books, in combination with other forms of text and talk in mainstream discourse, help establish assumptions that build social beliefs of what it means to be male and female.

To further illustrate how linguistic choices construct stereotypical notions of what it means to be female or male, we focus on two adjectives, "bright" and "brilliant", that were only used in reference to

male characters (see Table 1). These are adjectives that clearly connote positive traits associated with making the right decisions in what is most likely a leadership role. Both the adjectives occur only in reference to male characters, establishing an association between being "bright" or "brilliant" and being male. This is an example of one of the many ways that lexical choices construct and ingrain in the minds of young children the ways in which masculinity and femininity are constructed (as indicated by the list of adjectives offered in Tables 1 and 2). This is what Knowles and Malmkjaer (1996: 69) refer to as established, "collocational relationships" between words. It should be noted that the adjectives "bright" and "brilliant" were only observed in isolated instances in single texts; this was the case for many of the adjectives listed in Table 1 that do not appear in Table 2. This is a result of the relatively small corpus size, despite attempts to increase the number of texts by using a broader definition of Malaysian children's literature. However, some adjectives were identified across multiple texts and used only in reference to males or females. A case in point is the word "brave", which was used in reference to male characters in eight texts.

Table 3 reveals that the adjective "brave" was found to collocate with male characters in 9 of the 13 instances in which it was found. Although it was found to collocate with gender-neutral animal characters ("brave" mousedeer and "brave" tiger) in lines N4, N5, N6 and N13, it never appeared in reference to female characters. These texts establish that being brave is exclusively a male trait, just as being beautiful is an important attribute for females. This is an example of how linguistic means are used to stereotype characters along gendered lines.

Young girls reading these texts do not see any association between being female and being brave. We suggest that this limits young girls' development. Through these linguistic constructions, specific notions of what it means to be male and female are built into the mental schemas of young children, and these schemas guide their future behaviour (Bem, 1993; Smith, Cowie and Blades, 2003).

Table 3: Collocation of "brave"

N	Concordance		
1	Badang was thin and weak, but he was	**brave.**	His father had often told him that
2	he was stealing Badang's catch! But	**brave**	Badang rushed out of the bushes
3	madmen. He also hears about the five	**brave**	young men who came to the
4	special. "The mousedeer here are very	**brave.**	This would be a good place to
5	was still thinking about the	**brave**	mousedeer. "What is this tree I am
6	Malacca will also be strong like that	**brave,**	mousedeer," said Parameswara.
7	He had seen what a clever and	**brave**	man the fool Pak Pandir was.
8	'The Tiger Sultan', for I am as strong and	**brave.**	as the tiger," said the new Sultan.
9	to the mountainside and decided to be	**brave.**	"I want to see what he really is,"
10	into a lovely girl and Bunga Pekan into a	**brave**	young man. The egg hatches and
11	old. He told the villagers to look for a	**brave**	and kind young man to destroy the
12	Guan Chi to help them. Guan Chi was	**brave,**	kindhearted, and obedient to his
13	the ground. One of the tigers was very	**brave.**	It attacked the two tigers and they

Even female protagonists in these texts are not ascribed the range of adjectives that the male characters are accorded, including adjectives that reflect individual strengths or capabilities (see Table 1). Examples of this can be found in the two texts about the Princess of Mount Ledang, a popular Malay legend that tells the story of a fairy princess who keeps her freedom by cleverly making impossible demands in response to a marriage proposal from Sultan Mahmud Shah of Malacca. In both versions of the story, the only adjectives describing the princess are "beautiful" and "smiling", as demonstrated in the concordance lines in Table 4.

Table 4: Collocation of "Princess" in "The Princess of Mount Ledang"

N	Concordance		
1	the Sultan dreamed of a very beautiful	**princess.**	"I'm the Princess of
2	of Mount Ledang," said the smiling	**Princess.**	The Sultan tried to get closer
3	Once upon a time there was a beautiful	**princess**	who lived at the top of a
4	wash their clothes admired the	**princess.**	They talked about her, and
5	of Malacca heard about the beautiful	**princess.**	"If the princess is so beautiful,
6	about the beautiful princess. "If the	**princess**	is so beautiful, I would like to
7	mountain, hoping to meet the	**princess.**	

Although the story is about the princess, she is clearly portrayed as an object to be sought after and acquired by the Sultan of Malacca (a male character playing a supporting role) if he is able to fulfil her conditions. The objectification of the main character is reflected in the following excerpts from Lyons' "The Princess of Mount Ledang", which describe the princess as a possession to be admired and acquired for her beauty:

> The villagers who came to the stream to bathe and to wash their clothes admired the beautiful princess. They talked about her, and news of her beauty spread.
>
> "If the princess is so beautiful, I would like to marry her," thought the Sultan.
>
> "The Sultan of Malacca has sent us to find the Princess of Mount Ledang. He wants to marry her."
>
> (Lyons, 2004: 8–14)

Unlike male main characters in the earlier samples, the princess is not accorded any explicit epithets that describe her capabilities. She is a fairy princess with extraordinary abilities, and she is also intelligent, as evidenced in the way she tests the Sultan of Malacca. Yet, it is only her beauty that appears worthy of explicit mention.

While the adjective "brave" is often reserved for male protagonists in the selected children's stories, it appears that the princesses in the same set of texts must almost always be "beautiful". When repeatedly espoused in children's texts, these collocations along gendered lines help construct ideas of what it means to be male and female (Taylor, 2003).

The two versions of "The Princess of Mount Ledang" have female characters as the main characters. These two texts stand out against the multitude of other texts in which the protagonist is male. For this reason, these two texts can be viewed as "positively" contributing to the representation of females. However, a lexical analysis, such as the one offered here, reveals that even texts that appear to feature female characters prominently often fail to grant them any real positions of power. This is evident from the way the main character is linguistically marked in both versions of the Princess of Mount Ledang (see Table 3).

Within this observation lies a major contention of the present study: the reading of gender in children's texts must move beyond overt markers to include an analysis of covert markers realised through language.

CONCLUSION

The children's books analysed here serve a specific purpose in Malaysian society: they serve as tools to aid children's mastery of the English language (Saraceni, 2003). The relationship between gender-specific epithets identified in the findings reveals the possible associations Malaysian children may make between specific traits and a particular gender. These associations reflect the role of language in constructing identity. The connections that children make between words becomes a part of their "implicit knowledge about collocational relationships" in the English language (Knowles and Malmkjaer, 1996: 70).

Because language and behaviour are inextricably intertwined, these collocational relationships contribute to constructions of gender in the schemas of young children. In turn, these schemas determine their future behaviour and interactions as social beings.

This study highlights concerns that must be addressed if we want our children, both boys and girls, to have equal opportunities to realise their fullest potential. It is hoped that the findings will serve to alert Malaysian writers, publishers of children's books, parents and teachers about the role of language in the construction of gender identity. A desired outcome of CDA is to create "critical consciousness" so that those most affected by injustice and those who are in a position to address injustice may contribute to more effectively "shaping and reshaping" their environment (Fairclough, 2001: 197). If awareness is created among adult decision makers involved in the process of selecting texts for children and among children themselves about the powerful role of language in shaping thought, then texts such as those investigated in this study can serve as useful tools in empowering children of both genders.

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