

Language techniques as mediation strategies for complex and sensitive themes in selected children's animated films

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ABSTRACT

Children's animated films routinely carry complex and sensitive themes, including death and loss, coercion and social exclusion, inside entertainment made for young audiences, yet the language techniques through which such content is managed remain insufficiently specified, particularly for African audiences. This study examined the language techniques employed in mediating complex and sensitive themes in *Kirikou and the Sorceress* (1998), *Shrek* (2001), and *The Secret Life of Pets* (2016). This study was guided by semiotic theory. A convergent mixed methods design, qualitative-dominant, combined semiotic content analysis of the three films with a descriptive survey of 50 purposively selected respondents and interviews with 10 key informants in Webuye, Bungoma County, Kenya. Four coordinated techniques were identified: humour, dialogue, symbolism, and fantastical and supernatural events. The analysis indicated cultural variation in the form and deployment of these techniques, alongside convergence in their mediating functions, each technique managing the same order of themes through the resources of its own tradition. Field evidence corroborated the textual analysis, with 42% of respondents identifying humour as the principal feature making difficult content approachable and 72% reporting strong or moderate engagement. The study concludes that language techniques constitute a deliberate mediation system enabling animated film to address difficult content within age-appropriate entertainment, and it recommends their intentional deployment by animation artists, guided co-viewing by parents and curricular use by educators.

Keywords: Animated Film, Audience Reception, Complex Themes, Mediation Strategies, Semiotics

I. INTRODUCTION

Animation constructs immersive alternative worlds into which child audiences are transferred and within those worlds children encounter constructed meanings about morality, society and the self (Wells, 1998). The medium's apparent innocence conceals considerable thematic ambition. Analyses of mainstream animated cinema show that films addressed to children carry sustained social and political content (Booker, 2010; Ward, 2002), and animated films supply many of the first narratives through which children learn about death, prejudice and the wider social world (Bridgewater et al., 2021). Children are not passive recipients of this content: developmental research shows that they interpret media actively, with judgements that vary by age and experience (Anderson et al., 2023).

The scholarly record on this thematic work nonetheless proceeds along two largely parallel strands. One strand is textual. Rhetorical and ideological studies of animated features (Booker, 2010; Ward, 2002), multimodal analyses of humour and stereotype (Fazal, 2024), and production-side studies of cultural representation (Sugihartono & Adi, 2024) analyse the strategies films place on screen, but their claims stop at the screen. The other strand is audience-based. Experimental and developmental studies examine what viewers do with animated content, from parent-child conversation about death (Bridgewater et al., 2021) to children's judgements about censorship (Anderson et al., 2023) and the emotional responses animation elicits (Cai, 2024), but these studies detach reception from the specific textual strategies that shaped what was viewed. Within the sources reviewed for this study, designs that integrate close textual analysis with audience evidence in a single frame remain uncommon and African audiences of globally circulated animation are rarely represented in either strand. The present study was designed to work across that divide. Its purpose was to examine the language techniques employed in mediating complex and sensitive themes in three selected children's animated films, guided by the question: what language techniques mediate complex and sensitive themes in the selected films?

The three films were selected for cultural and temporal diversity. *Kirikou and the Sorceress* (1998) is rooted in West African folkloric tradition, *Shrek* (2001) parodies the Western fairy tale and *The Secret Life of Pets* (2016) presents a secular urban fantasy. Together they permit comparative analysis of how different production traditions manage comparable thematic content.

1.1 Research Objective

This study examined the language techniques employed in mediating complex and sensitive themes in *Kirikou and the Sorceress* (1998), *Shrek* (2001), and *The Secret Life of Pets* (2016).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by semiotic theory, operationalized as a three-step analytical protocol rather than invoked as background. The first step drew on Peirce's (1985) triadic typology of the sign. In coding the films, each candidate technique was classified by the ground of its signification: iconic, where meaning rests on resemblance; indexical, where it rests on causal or existential connection and symbolic, where it rests on convention. The classification did analytical work. It distinguished, for example, the conventional (symbolic) meanings of Karaba's talisman, which require cultural knowledge to activate, from the indexical force of a comic pratfall which requires none and it therefore predicted which meanings would be available to which audiences.

The second step applied Barthes' (1972) orders of signification as a laddering procedure. Each significant sign was read at four levels in sequence: denotation, what is literally presented; connotation, the culturally specific meanings carried; myth, the ideological content naturalized or contested and audience interpretation, at which level the question of which meanings actual viewers activate was treated as empirical rather than assumed. The onion exchange in *Shrek* illustrates the procedure: denotatively a vegetable with layers, connotatively a manufactured figure of concealed interiority, mythically a challenge to the equation of surface with essence, and empirically a sign whose deeper rungs are climbed by some viewers and not others.

The third step framed the audience data through Hall's (1980) encoding and decoding model, which treats reception as an active process admitting dominant, negotiated and oppositional readings. The model supplied the categories under which the field responses were interpreted: acceptance of complex themes under parental guidance was read as the dominant-negotiated band, while reports of fear and judgements of inappropriateness were read as negotiated and oppositional positions documented rather than minimized. Throughout, the films were treated as encoded texts whose language techniques tier meaning for differently equipped viewers, and audience evidence was treated as documentation of decoding rather than as proof of effects.

2.2 Conceptual Review

2.2.1 Humour

Humour is the most extensively theorized of the language techniques. Martin (2007) identifies amusement, laughter and mirth as core elements of the humour response and synthesizes the three classical accounts of why things are funny: incongruity, superiority and relief. Translation scholarship demonstrates that verbal humour is a structured, culture-bound system rather than incidental decoration (Spanakaki, 2007), and humour research documents its social functions, from tension relief in the face of serious content (David, 2014) to coping across cultural contexts, including East African comic performance (Namayi, 2020). Developmental work indicates that humorous framing supports children's retention and recall of content (Nwokah et al., 2013). Recent multimodal analysis shows humour operating as a vehicle for social meaning in animated film, including the negotiation of stereotypes (Fazal, 2024), while media-effects scholarship cautions that comic framing can trivialize or entrench the very content it makes approachable (Lewis & Shimanovsky, 2006).

2.2.2 Dialogue

Film-dialogue scholarship establishes that dialogue performs functions well beyond plot advancement: anchoring diegesis and character, communicating causality, revealing character, maintaining the code of realism and controlling viewer evaluation and emotion (Jaekle, 2013). Sound and voice scholarship extends the account to animated speech, where every vocal quality is designed (Beauchamp, 2012). Industry scholarship documents the dual address through which contemporary animated features speak to children and adults simultaneously (Brown, 2021), a phenomenon in which dialogue register is a principal instrument.

2.2.3 Symbolism

The semiotic tradition supplies the theory of the symbol as a conventional sign (Peirce, 1985), the account of connotation and myth through which symbols carry ideological content (Barthes, 1972), and the founding insight that the sign's relation to its meaning is arbitrary rather than natural (Saussure, 1959). Applied studies of animated cinema show symbolic systems carrying social argument beneath entertainment surfaces (Booker, 2010; Ward, 2002).

2.2.4 Fantastical and Supernatural Events

Research on death in animated films finds that fantastical settings deliver lessons that would otherwise be too confronting for young audiences (Bridgewater et al., 2021). Anthropological work on ritual explains the engagement that supernatural threat sustains (Liénard & Boyer, 2006), and early-childhood media scholarship documents young children's participation in fantastical media worlds (Dinham, 2021). Emotional engagement research indicates that audiences who see their values reflected in characters are more likely to identify with the messages presented (Cai, 2024), and production-side studies show indigenous cultural repertoires functioning as resources for thematic representation (Sugihartono & Adi, 2024).

2.2.5 The Gap

Across this literature, three limitations recur. Individual techniques are studied in isolation from one another; textual claims are rarely tested against audience evidence within the same design, the textual strand (Booker, 2010; Fazal, 2024; Sugihartono & Adi, 2024; Ward, 2002) and the audience strand (Anderson et al., 2023; Bridgewater et al., 2021; Cai, 2024) proceeding largely in parallel and African contexts are marginal to both strands. The study reported here addresses all three limitations by analyzing four techniques together across a culturally diverse corpus and by reading the textual findings against Kenyan field evidence.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Design

The study employed a convergent mixed methods design, qualitative-dominant, in which qualitative and quantitative strands are collected in the same phase, analysed separately and integrated at interpretation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The design was chosen on three grounds: complementarity, since textual meaning is accessible only to qualitative analysis while the distribution of audience perceptions is accessible only to quantitative description (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004); triangulation, since each strand checks the other and completeness, since reception cannot be read off the text but must be heard from audiences themselves.

3.2 Films and Content Analysis

The qualitative strand consisted of semiotic content analysis of the three films. Each film was segmented into scenes and coded against a study guide in three manual passes: initial codes were assigned scene by scene, grouped into candidate themes and then checked across the full corpus for consistency, with the coding reviewed by the second and third authors. Scenes are identified in this article by structural position, such as the opening scene or the climactic sequence, together with quoted dialogue, since running times differ across editions while positional references remain checkable against any copy.

3.3 Sampling and Participants

The quantitative strand surveyed 50 respondents in Webuye, Bungoma County, Kenya, selected purposively (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) to capture the study's population of interest: viewers able to respond to the selected films across the developmental range the films address. Respondents were drawn from four age brackets (6–13, 14–18, 19–25 and 26 and above), spanning child, adolescent, young adult and adult viewers. Participation required familiarity with the selected films. Ten key informants comprising of teachers, parents and post-secondary students, were selected for their capacity to speak to children's media engagement from professional, parental and near-peer positions respectively.

3.4 Instruments

The questionnaire was researcher-designed and organized in sections aligned with the study's objectives: respondent characteristics, theme detection in the selected films, perceived accessibility features including humour, character relatability, visual appeal and sound; emotional engagement and identification and assessments of appropriateness and perceived value. Items were closed-ended, using categorical and Likert-type formats, to permit descriptive summary across age brackets. The instrument was administered in English and explained orally in

Kiswahili or Luhya where preferred and it was reviewed by the supervising authors before administration. Key informant interviews followed a semi-structured guide addressing the same domains in open form.

3.5 Analysis and Ethics

Questionnaire responses were summarized descriptively using frequencies and percentages; no inferential statistics were computed and the figures reported describe this purposive sample rather than a population. Interview responses were analysed thematically. Ethical clearance was obtained before data collection, informed consent was secured from adult participants and parental consent with child assent was secured for minors; administration was anonymous.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Four language techniques were found to mediate complex and sensitive themes across the corpus: humour, dialogue, symbolism and fantastical and supernatural events. Each is presented in turn, followed by the cross-film synthesis and the corroborating field evidence.

4.1 Humour

Humour was the most consistently deployed technique, creating the affective safety within which difficult content is approached. In *Kirikou and the Sorceress*, the pattern is set in the opening scene, when a voice from the womb announces, “Mother, give birth to me,” and the newborn Kirikou washes himself and sets off to confront the sorceress: the comedy of the impossible self-sufficient infant is established before the film's first threat appears. In *Shrek*, the comic framework is announced when the ogre tears a page from the storybook prologue and remarks to the torch-bearing mob, “This is the part where you run away,” while the film's most quoted exchange, “Ogres are like onions... onions have layers,” converts bodily shame and social rejection into a comic botany lesson that children can follow and adults can decode. In *The Secret Life of Pets*, the opening montage of owners leaving for work renders each pet's secret behaviour, the poodle switching to heavy metal, the cat raiding the refrigerator, as comic exaggeration of a recognizable domestic solitude. In each film the mechanisms of incongruity, superiority and relief (Martin, 2007) operate on culturally distinct material toward the same mediating end.

4.2 Dialogue

Dialogue carries themes indirectly through register, idiolect and implicature. *Kirikou and the Sorceress* concentrates its strategy in a single repeated line: Kirikou's question, “Why is Karaba wicked?”, is put successively to his mother, the villagers, the grandfather and answered only in the final act, when the grandfather explains that men drove a poisoned thorn into Karaba's spine and that her cruelty is the expression of her pain. The film thereby withholds its moral thesis, that evil has causes and can be healed, until the audience has asked the question with the protagonist. *Shrek* operates a bifurcated register in which the same lines address child and adult audiences at different levels (Jaecle, 2013), exemplified in the Farquaad and Mirror exchange, whose marital-contest framing entertains children while its satire of commodified courtship addresses adults. *The Secret Life of Pets* establishes the interior monologue as its dominant mode in the opening minutes, when Max introduces himself, “I'm Max, and I'm the luckiest dog in New York,” teaching the audience within the first scene to hear a pet's inner speech as ordinary, a device that later carries the film's treatment of abandonment through Duke's account of his lost owner.

4.3 Symbolism

Symbolism operates through ladder signs readable at denotation, connotation and myth (Barthes, 1972), with deeper rungs held in reserve for viewers equipped to climb them. Karaba's talisman condenses sacred object and wound: the film stages the duality in the climactic extraction scene, in which Kirikou springs onto Karaba's back and draws the poisoned thorn from her spine, an act framed not as combat but as release, followed at once by her transformation. In *Shrek*, the swamp figures stigmatized home and the onion the layered self, and the film makes the reading explicit when Shrek protests at the fairy-tale refugees “dumped” on his land, converting a comic property dispute into a displacement narrative. In *The Secret Life of Pets*, the bone figures attachment as possession, while the opening movement across the brownstone facade, one pet's story framed per lit window, establishes the apartment building as a symbol of urban proximity without community.

4.4 Fantastical and Supernatural Events

Fantastical events distance threatening content through displacement, literalization, normalization and reversal. *Kirikou and the Sorceress* announces its permeable supernatural premise in the opening scene, when the unborn child speaks and his mother replies without surprise, and delivers its clearest repealed death in the final scene,

when the village men long believed devoured are restored to human form from the fetishes into which they had been transformed. *Shrek* states Fiona's curse in the metre of a nursery rhyme, "By night one way, by day another," and resolves it in the least conventional direction available, since "love's true form" turns out to be the ogre and not the princess, a reversal that relocates worth from appearance to acceptance. *The Secret Life of Pets* rests on an unmarked premise, since no scene explains why the animals speak and reserves its initiation into strangeness for the sewer descent, where the Flushed Pets' rite, chanted as "liberated forever, domesticated never," marks the passage from the sunlit domestic world to its underside (Bridgewater et al., 2021; Liénard & Boyer, 2006).

4.5 Cross-Film Convergence and Audience Corroboration

Table 1 summarizes the four techniques across the corpus. The central finding is that the techniques vary culturally in form while converging in function: each film manages the same order of themes, death and loss, coercion, exclusion, abandonment, through the resources of its own tradition, folkloric, fairy-tale parodic and secular urban respectively. Beyond the individual techniques, the films coordinate them, so that humour, dialogue, symbolism and fantasy operate as a single language system rather than as isolated devices.

The field strand corroborated the textual analysis. Of the 50 respondents, 42% identified humour as the principal feature making difficult content approachable, matching the content analysis's identification of humour as the leading technique, and 72% reported strong (40%) or moderate (32%) engagement with the films' characters and themes. 68% accepted the inclusion of complex themes in child-accessible animation under parental guidance, while divergent voices were recorded rather than minimized: 18% reported temporary fear or anxiety and 14% judged the themes inappropriate regardless of guidance. In Hall's (1980) terms, the pattern documents dominant-negotiated decoding as the majority position with genuinely oppositional readings present. Key informant evidence extended the picture: teachers reported that the films generated deeper, more personally engaged classroom discussion of prejudice and capability than didactic teaching, since learners spoke through the displaced case of the fiction, and adult students reported that rewatching *Shrek* revealed layers invisible in childhood, direct evidence of the deferred symbol interpretation the laddering model predicts. These convergences are advanced as descriptions of this purposive sample, not as population estimates.

Table 1

Language Techniques Across the Three Films

Technique	Kirikou and the Sorceress	Shrek	The Secret Life of Pets
Humour	Folkloric incongruity; self-sufficient infant; trap episodes	Generic parody; the onions exchange	Comic exaggeration; owners-leaving montage
Dialogue	Interrogative economy; the why-is-Karaba-wicked arc	Bifurcated register; Farquaad and the Mirror	Interior monologue; Duke's backstory
Symbolism	Talisman and thorn: sacred object and wound	Swamp and onion: stigma and layered self	The bone: attachment as possession; the facade of windows
Fantastical events	Speaking womb; repealed deaths; fetishes restored	Nursery-rhyme curse; reversed kiss	Unmarked premise; sewer katabasis and rite

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

5.1 Conclusion

The three selected films deploy four coordinated language techniques, humour, dialogue, symbolism and fantastical and supernatural events that manage complex and sensitive themes within age-appropriate entertainment. The techniques vary culturally in form while converging in function and the inclusion of *Kirikou and the Sorceress* alongside two Hollywood productions shows the strategies operative within a West African narrative tradition, with the culturally grounded film making contributions to African child audiences that the Hollywood texts alone cannot replicate. Audience evidence from a Kenyan field context corroborates the textual findings while marking their conditionality on representation, age and adult mediation.

5.2 Recommendations

The study recommends that animation artists, particularly African animators drawing on indigenous traditions, deploy these techniques with deliberate intentionality; that parents treat guided co-viewing as a developmental resource; and that educators integrate selected animated content with structured discussion. Future research should



extend the corpus across sub-Saharan African animated traditions and test the mediation model with designs that pair textual analysis and audience evidence, as pursued here.

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare that they do not have any known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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