

## A SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF STEREOTYPES IN *FREEDOM WRITERS* MOVIE

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### Abstract

This research is a Sociolinguistic study which aims at revealing the categories and the functions of stereotypes occurring in *Freedom Writers* movie. This research applied descriptive qualitative method to describe the phenomenon under research in a textual form. Additionally, this research also used quantitative method to support the interpretation of data by presenting the research findings in numerical form. The primary instrument of this research was the researcher and the secondary instrument was the movie transcript. The data were collected by selecting dialogues containing stereotypes while watching and listening to the movie. For the data analysis, the research findings were classified based on the theories used in the research and analysed according to each categorization. The results of the research obtained from the qualitative and quantitative investigation are stated as follows. Five categories of stereotypes are found in the utterances of the characters, namely gender; race; age; physical features; and occupations and socioeconomic status. Race gets the highest number of occurrences, whereas the lowest one is equally occupied by gender and physical features. Furthermore, all three functions of stereotypes are identified in the movie, namely cognitive economy, ego protection, and social function. The findings reveal that cognitive economy is the most frequently used function. In contrast, social function is the least frequent function used by the characters throughout the movie.

Keywords: sociolinguistic analysis, stereotypes, *Freedom Writers* movie

### INTRODUCTION

Humans are social creatures who need to socialize with each other. They use language in order to deliver messages when they socialize. When people use language, there are many factors which influence the choice of words they produce. One of those factors is culture. As people come from different cultures formed by different norms, values, ideologies, and other components, they may face difficulties in understanding each other's intention. The lack of cultural awareness can cause misunderstanding which affects the flow of interaction between the participants. The misunderstanding can be in the form of preconceptions about the participants which is also called stereotypes.

Generally, stereotypes are perceived in a bad way because they suggest negative preconceptions about other people. There is a possibility in every social interaction that

participants form preconceptions about other individuals. Thus, stereotypes are important to be studied since people may employ stereotypes about others in daily interactions without noticing it. In addition, stereotypes can lead to misunderstanding which can harm the interactions if the performers are unaware of it.

In general, stereotypes are seen as the representation of traits which are viewed as characteristics of social groups or of the individual members, particularly those which distinguish groups from each other (Strangor in Nelson, 2009: 02). Each of the groups has something that distinguishes them from other groups. The differences generate and become the base of stereotypes.

Hamilton and Sherman in Bar-Tal and Teichman (2005: 23) define stereotypes as stored beliefs about the characterizations of a group of people. People have expectations and beliefs that

certain characteristics or traits are related to particular groups. Their expectations that all groups' members have the same traits lead to stereotypes.

People use stereotypes on others on various aspects. It happens because stereotypes are based on many social categories. According to Schneider (2005), those categories can be listed as gender, race, age, physical features, language, occupations and socioeconomic status, national groups, and other miscellaneous categories.

Stereotypes usually cause conflicts between people or groups. Nevertheless, stereotypes emerge because they also serve several functions for the users. There are some motivations which are beneficial to people that encourage them to stereotype others. Ashmore and Del Boca in Synder and Miene (1994: 36) propose three functions of stereotypes based on three orientations: the cognitive (stereotypes serve the cognitive economy function), the psychodynamic (stereotypes serve the ego protection function), and the sociocultural orientation (stereotypes serve the social function).

Considering some points stated earlier, the researcher is intrigued to study two aspects of stereotypes, namely the categories and functions of stereotypes. In this research, a movie entitled *Freedom Writers* is chosen as the object of investigation by the researcher. The movie represents the life in a multicultural society and shows numerous stereotypes uttered by the characters. It is also adapted from a true story which proves that stereotypes exist in real life.

To sum up, there are two objectives of the research. The first objective is to describe the categories of stereotypes found in *Freedom Writers* movie. Furthermore, the second objective is to identify the functions of stereotypes occurred in the movie. Finally, the researcher expects that the research adds more understanding and knowledge of the phenomenon of stereotypes for Linguistics students and suggests that the readers in general should be careful when using stereotypes because they are mostly harmful.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

The research applied descriptive qualitative research design as the type of study with the addition of quantitative research design to support the descriptions of the findings by showing detailed statistics in the findings section. The researcher used the descriptive qualitative research to describe all the phenomena related to stereotypes found in *Freedom Writers* movie. Qualitative research is a research which constructs narrative or textual descriptions of the studied phenomena (Vanderstoep and Johnson, 2009: 167). The collected data were interpreted first with quantitative approach and explained thoroughly with qualitative method in words based on their categories and functions afterwards.

The main instrument of the research was the researcher herself since the research employed qualitative research. According to Lincoln and Guba in Vanderstoep and Johnston (2009: 188), human is the best instrument for qualitative research. Thus, the researcher played as the planner, the data collector, the data analyst,

and the reporter of the research findings. The researcher also used the transcript as the secondary instrument to help find the data and double-check the dialogues in the movie.

The data of the research which were in the form of utterances were collected by watching and listening to the movie comprehensively. The researcher read the movie transcript while watching the movie to verify the accuracy of dialogues uttered by the characters. Every occurrence of stereotypes found in the movie was noted down for further analysis. Afterwards, all the collected data in *Freedom Writers* movie were classified based on the theories used in the research and analysed according to each categorization.

In addition, triangulation was employed to gain trustworthiness. Denzin (2009: 1) propose four basic kinds of triangulation: data, investigator, theory, and methodological triangulation. This research employed investigator triangulation which was achieved by discussing and consulting the research findings with supervisors and two fellow students who major in Linguistics.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

A total of 30 data related to stereotypes occur in *Freedom Writers* movie. Not all categories of stereotypes appear in the movie as only five categories of stereotypes that occur: gender, race, age, physical features, and occupations and socioeconomic status. Based on the statistical analysis, the most frequently used category is race with 16 data. Age holds the second rank with seven occurrences whereas the

third position is taken by occupations and socioeconomic status with three data. Gender and physical features are the least frequent categories used in uttering stereotypes with each category only appears twice. On the other hand, language, national groups and others are not found in the findings. The result indicates that the characters in *Freedom Writers* movie throw racial stereotypes more than stereotypes based on other social categories.

In regard to the functions of stereotypes, the findings reveal that all three functions appear in the movie. Cognitive economy is the most frequently used stereotype function in the movie with a total of 15 data. Ego protection follows in the second position with eight data in total. Social function is only one data behind ego protection which makes it the least used function with seven data. From these findings, it can be concluded that the characters in *Freedom Writers* mostly use stereotypes in their utterances to help themselves manage their obtained information about other characters easier.

Some instances of the data findings are presented to give comprehensive descriptions of the phenomena of stereotypes in *Freedom Writers* movie. The following dialogue demonstrates one of the gender stereotypes found in the movie which serves the social function. It takes place in a family setting.

Erin : I can't believe he brought up my salary. What's happened to him? He was like Atticus Finch to me when I was growing up, and now he's talking about salaries? I think he's playing too much golf. In fact, I think he needs an intervention.

Why isn't being a teacher good enough for him?

Scott : Honey, just calm down. You know, except for marrying me, you never seriously disappoint him. He worships you.

Erin : He likes you. He just doesn't...

Scott : He just doesn't think I'm good enough for you, which is fine. **That's what fathers do.** I'm sure I'll be that way someday.

(00:18:50-00:19:20/8)

After the slightly unpleasant family dinner, Erin and Scott have a small talk before bed. Scott consoles her because she thinks she disappoints her father. Scott says that she never really disappoints Steve. While comforting Erin, Scott utters a stereotype about fathers who are viewed to always be overprotective of their daughters. In Steve and Erin's case, the stereotype is correct as Steve admits he is worried about Erin. In addition, Scott comments that he would act like Steve once he becomes a father. This shows that Scott is stereotyping a group that he is not yet a part of. It also implies that daughters are not capable of having good judgments and protecting themselves which can be noticed from Erin's father's constant worrying. Furthermore, the use of the plural noun of father verifies the gender stereotype as it implies that all fathers act the same way. The gender stereotype in Scott's utterance serves the social function which helps Scott identify himself and his future self as a father.

Moreover, a case of race being used as a base of stereotypes is portrayed in the dialogue below. It serves the cognitive economy function.

Erin : All right, you know what? I want you all to move to this side of the

room. You in the back, up here. Sindy and all of you, move to the back. Come on. Let's go. Now!

Jamal : **Get your ass back to China, all of y'all.**

A Cambodian student: You're all little midget-ass punks. Move before I stomp your peanuts.

(00:20:31-00:21:53/10)

Erin orders her students to move and change seats. The students stand up to move and when Jamal, a black student, face the Cambodian students, he asks them to go back to China which means he uses the racial stereotype that every Asian is Chinese or from China. Jamal is being ignorant. He categorizes Asians as one group only when in reality Asians consist of various racial groups. Furthermore, he uses words like *all*, *y'all* and *China* which emphasize his stereotype towards the Cambodian students. *Asians are Chinese* is a widely known stereotype that many people still hold. Aside from being incorrect, this stereotype can also be offensive. The reason Jamal utters the stereotype could be because in his opinion, the Cambodian students do not look any different than Chinese. He does not know their origin so he just simply classifies them as Chinese to notice them more easily.

Another example shown below illustrates how stereotype based on age occurs and fulfils the ego protection function.

Brian : Erin can't do that! Distinguished Honor Students are mine. She's not allowed to teach them. She's only been here a year.

Ms. Campbell : The student requested it. And Gruwell has got Cohn

in her back pocket. **What gets me is they're violent, they break laws, they destroy school property and in the end we make them special.** We reward them like... I just don't see what that teaches them.

(01:15:58-00:16:23/26)

Ms. Campbell tells Brian that Victoria, one of his honors student, asked to be moved to Erin's class. She then generalizes and ridicule all Erin's teenage students as violent and bad kids. She disregards that even though almost all of Erin's students consist of blacks, Latinos, and Asians, not all of them are violent. In fact, they already show progress in academic and in behavior. The stereotype can be identified by the use of the words *they*, *violent*, *break laws* and *destroy school property*. Ms. Campbell mentions those stereotypes to defend her opinion that they should not get any special treatment because they are troublemakers. Her sudden comment that specifically brings the topic about the special treatment shows Ms. Campbell's resentment towards Erin's students.

Furthermore, the dialogue in the following part exhibits an occurrence of stereotypes based on physical features that carries out the cognitive economy function.

Marcus : Ms. G sent our letters all the way to Amsterdam to Miep Gies, herself. When Ms. G made up her mind about something, there was no stopping her, man, for real. And after we raised the money to bring her to Long Beach, there she was. **But,**

**damn, I didn't expect her to be so small.**

(01:25:31-01:25:40/29)

Marcus admires Miep Gies for her brave act to help Anne Frank and her family. He sees her as his hero and wants to escort her once she arrives at Woodrow Wilson High School. When she finally arrives, Marcus makes a comment about her physique. In reality, Miep Gies is smaller than what he had expected. This is most likely due to Marcus' preconception that since Miep Gies is brave, he had the assumption that her build would be tall or big which leads to his expectation being proven wrong. The use of the words *small*, *didn't* and *expect* verifies the use of physical feature stereotype in Marcus' utterance.

The next example shows the occurrence of a stereotype based on occupations which serves the ego protection function.

Steve : **With your brains, you could run a major corporation. Instead, I worry all night because you're a teacher at Attica.**

Erin : Can you hear what you're saying? How many times have I listened to you about walking civil rights marches?

Steve : These gangs are criminals not activists. You read the papers?

(00:07:37-00:17:51/5)

Steve continues expressing his disagreement about Erin's decision by pointing out that with her intelligence, Erin could get a better and higher status job in a big corporation. Steve basically sees teacher as an average status occupation and implies that his daughter is too good to be a teacher. Teaching is sometimes stereotyped as a worthless profession. By mentioning how smart Erin is, Steve subtly insults Erin's current job as a

teacher. The use of the words *brain* and *teacher* show that the stereotype is based on occupation.

## CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

### Conclusion

Based on the findings and discussion, there are two conclusions that can be concluded. First, in regard to the first research problem, there are five categories used as the bases of the stereotypes that occur in *Freedom Writers* movie, namely gender, race, age, physical features, and occupations and socioeconomic status. Among the five categories, race is used the most frequently with 16 data. It indicates that race is considered the category with the most evident differences. The characters in *Freedom Writers* consist of people of various races. They see each other almost every day which allows them to observe many differences between their races easily. Additionally, past experiences of the characters which involve two or more racial groups also motivate the forming and the use of stereotypes based on race as a social category. On the other hand, gender and physical features are ranked the lowest. Each of them is used as the bases of stereotypes twice.

Second, with regard to the second objective, the functions of stereotypes in *Freedom Writers* movie, all three functions of stereotypes are identified in the movie: cognitive economy, ego protection, and social function. Cognitive economy is the first in frequency with the highest number of data. There are 16 data that show stereotypes serve the function of cognitive economy. This result suggests that people mostly use stereotypes to help themselves sort

information about other people in society or each individual's complexity that can be difficult to absorb and manage. People sometimes use stereotypes to guide them to act around people who are different from them based on what beliefs and expectations they already have about those people.

In *Freedom Writers*, many of the stereotypes that serve cognitive economy function are the ones based on race and age. The characters in *Freedom Writers* come from various races and backgrounds. The racial tension causes many people of one race to be wary of people from other races. It makes them use stereotypes they have about other races when they interact with characters of other races. The stereotypes help them determine what action to take when they face people of other races. In addition, the movie also stresses the differences in age of the characters. Most of the time, it shows what the teachers think about the students. In the movie, the teachers have bad experiences with their previous students. It causes them to apply stereotypes to the new students without looking into each student's distinctive characteristics. The stereotypes also enable them to simplify their job in categorizing the students and giving study material.

On the contrary, social function has the smallest number of occurrences with seven data in total due to the little emphasis on interactions between members of the same group. Social function is related to views or ideas shared by members of a group. Stereotypes which serve this function work as a connection that help group members fit in within their own group.

## Suggestions

Considering the results of the research, the researcher provides several suggestions for the following parties. First, to linguistic students, the researcher hopes that conducting a research about stereotype under linguistic study can be an option as there still are not that many linguistic studies about stereotypes. Students can investigate more about the use of stereotypes in people's utterances. Second, to future researchers, it is expected that they use objects of investigation with richer data to achieve more extensive research and may explore other aspects of stereotypes such as how people utter stereotypes and how stereotypes take place in various social settings. Third, to readers in general, the researcher suggests to be careful when using stereotypes in social interactions since the forming of stereotypes is inevitable and sometime they are not aware of uttering them.

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