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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Plasticity of Discourse: A Critical Multimodal Analysis of Language and Gender in *Barbie*

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| ABSTRACT

Greta Gerwig's 2023 film *Barbie* provides a dynamic and culturally resonant framework for examining the interplay between language, gender ideology, and popular media. This study conducts a critical multimodal discourse analysis of the film's linguistic and semiotic strategies, focusing on how dialogue, visual composition, and musical elements collectively construct and deconstruct normative gender scripts. By analyzing key sequences—including the utopian discourse of Barbieland, Gloria's metacritical monologue on feminine contradictions, and the Kens' parodic performance of patriarchy—this paper argues that *Barbie* functions as a form of public metalinguistics. It not only reflects but actively engages audiences in critiquing the ways language shapes identity, authority, and social possibility. The film navigates the tensions between neoliberal co-optation and feminist critique, ultimately proposing that discursive awareness can serve as a catalyst for reimagining entrenched gender norms. This research contributes to the fields of cinematic linguistics and feminist media studies by illustrating how mainstream film can foster critical language awareness and public discourse on gender performativity.

| KEYWORDS

Critical discourse analysis, multimodal analysis, gender performativity, feminist film studies, popular culture, sociolinguistics

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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### 1. Introduction

Greta Gerwig's *Barbie* emerged not only as a box-office phenomenon but as a cultural text that invites scrutiny of the linguistic mechanisms underlying gender construction. At its core, the film is concerned with the plasticity of discourse—the ways in which language can be molded to perpetuate or challenge social norms. This paper contends that *Barbie* operates as a form of widely accessible metallinguistic commentary, using the metaphor of plasticity to explore how speech, visual signs, and sound collaborate in the performance of gender.

The film's narrative arc—from the scripted perfection of Barbieland to the nuanced negotiations of the Real World—mirrors a broader journey toward discursive consciousness. In Barbieland, language functions as a rigid template: characters recite affirmations that reinforce a static, optimistic identity. This linguistic uniformity begins to fracture when the protagonist encounters thoughts and experiences that exceed available vocabularies, such as mortality and doubt. Such moments highlight a central theme: language both enables and constrains our understanding of self and society.

This study examines *Barbie* through an integrated critical multimodal framework, analyzing how its dialogue, cinematography, costume, and soundtrack collaborate to produce meaning. In doing so, it contributes to an expanding body of research that treats popular films not merely as entertainment but as sites of discursive innovation and ideological contestation. By unpacking the film's layered use of language, we aim to demonstrate how mainstream cinema can foster public engagement with issues typically confined to academic discourse—namely, the politics of gender, the performativity of identity, and the potential for linguistic agency.

## 2. Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with Barbie spans several decades and disciplinary perspectives. Early studies often focused on the doll's impact on body image and the socialization of girls into normative femininity (Rogers, 1999). Later work adopted more critical stances, examining Barbie as an icon of consumer capitalism and post-feminist individualism (Rand, 2014; Cavalcante, 2018). These analyses typically centered on the material object and its marketing, with less attention to discursive or narrative dimensions.

With the release of Gerwig's film, scholarship has begun to shift toward its thematic and aesthetic complexity. Commentators have noted its intertextual richness, its negotiation of feminist history, and its meta-commentary on intellectual property (Smail, 2023; Koresky, 2023). Yet linguistic and discourse-oriented readings remain relatively sparse, despite the film's obvious preoccupation with how characters speak, what they are permitted to say, and how language shapes their worlds.

In the field of linguistics, research on film and television has grown considerably over the past two decades. Studies in telecinematic discourse have examined how scripted dialogue constructs character identity, advances plot, and reflects social norms (Piazza et al., 2011). Multimodal discourse analysis has further emphasized the need to study film as an integrated semiotic system in which language, image, sound, and movement co-produce meaning (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021; Bateman & Schmidt, 2012). Such approaches align with broader turns in media studies toward understanding cinema as a multimodal text.

Feminist linguistic and discourse analysis provides another key foundation. Research in this tradition has long examined how language perpetuates gender ideologies, often focusing on media representations, advertising rhetoric, and everyday interaction (Lazar, 2005; Mills, 1995). Work on gender performativity, following Judith Butler (1990), has further underscored the role of repetitive linguistic and bodily acts in constituting gendered subjects. These theoretical perspectives are particularly relevant to *Barbie*, a film that literalizes the notion of "performing" gender through its doll protagonists.

What remains underdeveloped is the application of such integrated frameworks to mainstream, commercially successful films that explicitly thematize language and discourse. *Barbie* offers a compelling case precisely because it invites viewers to reflect on the words they use, the scripts they follow, and the possibilities for speaking otherwise. This study aims to bridge the gap between film analysis, critical linguistics, and gender theory by offering a detailed, multimodal examination of how *Barbie* engages with the politics of language.

## 3. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

### 3.1 Analytical Approach

This study employs an interdisciplinary framework that integrates three principal approaches:

1. **Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA):** Following Fairclough (1995) and van Dijk (2008), CDA provides tools for examining how language reproduces, legitimizes, or challenges social power structures. In the context of *Barbie*, this involves analyzing how dialogue constructs gender norms, how certain speech forms are privileged or marginalized, and how characters negotiate discursive authority.
2. **Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA):** Drawing on Kress and van Leeuwen (2021) and O'Halloran (2011), MDA treats communication as inherently multisemiotic. For this study, it allows simultaneous attention to verbal dialogue, visual composition (color, framing, costume), kinetic elements (movement, gesture), and auditory features (music, silence, vocal tone).
3. **Feminist Stylistics and Performativity Theory:** Building on Mills (1995) and Butler (1990), this dimension focuses specifically on the linguistic construction of gender. It examines how characters "do" gender through language—how they adopt, resist, or parody available discursive scripts—and how the film itself reflects on the process of gendering through speech and representation.

Together, these approaches enable a layered analysis of *Barbie* as a coherent yet complex discursive artifact, one that both represents and reflects upon the role of language in shaping gendered worlds.

### 3.2 Methodological Procedure

The analysis proceeded through four structured phases:

#### Phase 1: Textual Selection and Multimodal Transcription

Eight sequences were selected as representative of the film's narrative and discursive development. These include:

- The opening montage of Barbieland perfection
- Stereotypical Barbie's first disruptive thoughts
- Arrival and initial encounters in the Real World
- The Mattel boardroom scene

- Gloria's monologue on impossible feminine demands
- The Kens' patriarchal takeover
- Barbie's strategic response and speech to the Kens
- The final scenes of return and transformation

Each sequence was transcribed in detail, noting not only dialogue but also shot scale, camera movement, editing rhythm, color palette, character positioning, costume details, prominent sounds, and musical cues.

## **Phase 2: Stratified Analysis**

Each transcribed sequence was analyzed across three interconnected strata:

### *Linguistic Analysis*

- Lexical patterns and semantic fields (e.g., perfection vs. imperfection terminology)
- Syntactic features (declarative certainty vs. interrogative doubt, use of imperatives)
- Speech acts and conversational structure (turn-taking, interruption, adjacency pairs)
- Metaphor, irony, and intertextual reference
- Code-switching and shifts in register

### *Visual Analysis*

- Color symbolism and its ideological associations (pink utopia vs. grey corporate space)
- Spatial composition and social relations (proximity, elevation, framing)
- Costume as a marker of identity and transformation
- Choreography of group movement (synchronized vs. chaotic)
- Cinematographic techniques (lighting, focus, camera angle)

### *Sonic and Musical Analysis*

- Diegetic vs. non-diegetic sound and its narrative function
- Lyrical content of featured songs as thematic commentary
- Musical genre as cultural signifier (e.g., pop, rock, Broadway-style numbers)
- Strategic deployment of silence as a discursive device

## **Phase 3: Integrative Interpretation**

Findings from each stratum were mapped onto one another to identify moments of semiotic alignment or tension. For example, how does the upbeat non-diegetic music during Barbieland's morning routine reinforce the dialogue's affirmative declarations? How does the visual contrast between pink and grey underscore the clash between Barbieland's optimism and the Real World's complexity? This phase sought to understand how multiple modes collaborate to produce the film's ideological messages.

## **Phase 4: Contextual and Critical Reflection**

The integrated analysis was then situated within broader cultural and theoretical contexts. This included considering the film's intervention in ongoing debates about feminism, neoliberalism, and representation, as well as its potential to foster public discourse awareness among diverse audiences.

## **4. Analysis**

### **4.1 Barbieland: The Utopian Discourse of Perfected Femininity**

Barbieland is introduced as a linguistically and visually coherent utopia. Its inhabitants speak in what might be termed "affirmative declaratives"—short, positive statements that admit no ambiguity or conflict. Exchanges such as "Hi Barbie!" "Hi Barbie!" and "I'm doing great!" "I'm also doing great!" exemplify a discourse of seamless agreement and perpetual achievement. This language is syntactically simple, lexically restricted to upbeat vocabulary, and pragmatically oriented toward mutual reinforcement rather than information exchange.

Visually, this linguistic order is mirrored in the film's production design. Bright, saturated pinks dominate the color palette, suggesting a world without shadows or ambiguity. Symmetrical compositions and highly choreographed group movements reinforce a sense of predictable order. The overall effect is of a society in which both language and visual environment collaborate to produce a stable, cheerful reality.

Yet this discursive utopia is fragile. The first sign of disruption occurs not through external invasion but through an internal linguistic rupture: Stereotypical Barbie's question, "Do you guys ever think about dying?" Grammatically, the question introduces doubt; lexically, it introduces a topic entirely absent from Barbieland's approved vocabulary. The visual correlates are equally telling: a stumble in her step, a flat tire on her heel, the sudden appearance of cellulite. This multimodal disruption suggests that experience can outrun available language, and that such excess inevitably strains the seams of ideological systems.

#### **4.2 The Real World: A Collision of Discursive Regimes**

Upon entering the Real World, Barbie encounters a far more complex and often contradictory linguistic landscape. Three distinct discursive communities emerge, each with its own norms and power dynamics:

##### *Corporate Discourse at Mattel*

The executives speak in the jargon of brand management and market optimization. Their dialogue is filled with abstractions—"consumer expectations," "brand integrity," "market saturation"—that erase human particularity. Visually, their environment reinforces this linguistic flattening: a monochrome grey office, sterile and impersonal, contrasts sharply with Barbieland's vibrant plasticity. In this context, Barbie is positioned not as a subject but as a commodity to be controlled, a discursive shift that underscores the dehumanizing potential of corporate language.

##### *Adolescent Critical Discourse*

Sasha, the teenager Barbie meets, initially responds with a barrage of academic-feminist critique: "You represent everything wrong with our culture... You're a fascist!" Her language is steeped in the terminology of contemporary social critique, reflecting an educated, politically aware discourse that is entirely foreign to Barbie. This encounter highlights generational and ideological shifts in feminist language, illustrating how the same icon can be read through radically different discursive lenses.

##### *Maternal Negotiation*

Gloria, Sasha's mother and a Mattel employee, operates at the intersection of these discursive worlds. She must navigate corporate language at work, maternal language with her daughter, and a more personal, nostalgic language in relation to Barbie. Her character embodies the linguistic labor many women perform: code-switching between registers, mediating between conflicting discourses, and often struggling to find a voice that feels authentically her own.

These collisions demonstrate that linguistic competence is context-dependent and that power is often exercised through control of discursive norms. Barbie's initial disorientation in the Real World is not merely cultural but deeply linguistic: she lacks the vocabulary, the pragmatic skills, and the contextual knowledge to participate effectively in these new speech communities.

#### **4.3 Gloria's Monologue: Articulating the Contradictory Imperatives of Femininity**

Perhaps the film's most powerful discursive moment is Gloria's extended monologue, in which she catalogues the impossible and contradictory demands placed on women. Linguistically, the speech is masterfully constructed. It employs paratactic accumulation—long lists of imperatives without hierarchical organization—to mimic the overwhelming, non-logical nature of these social expectations. The syntax oscillates rapidly between "you have to" and "you can't," enacting at the grammatical level the double binds described.

Lexically, the monologue covers an exhaustive range of domains: physical appearance ("be thin, but not too thin"), emotional management ("be grateful, but not satisfied"), professional conduct ("be a boss, but don't be mean"), and interpersonal relations ("be a mom, but don't talk about your kids all the time"). This comprehensive coverage underscores how regulatory discourse infiltrates every facet of feminine existence.

The speech's rhetorical power lies not in offering solutions but in performing what discourse analysts term "naming"—giving explicit linguistic form to what often remains internalized, fragmented, and unspoken. By articulating these pressures in a coherent, sustained narrative, Gloria's monologue makes them visible, shareable, and therefore potentially negotiable. It transforms private anxiety into public discourse, a crucial step toward collective critique.

Visually, the scene is shot in intimate close-ups, emphasizing Gloria's emotional labor and inviting viewer identification. The absence of non-diegetic music during most of the speech focuses attention entirely on the words themselves, reinforcing the primacy of language in this moment of revelation.

#### 4.4 The Kens' Takeover: Patriarchal Discourse as Parodic Performance

The Kens' appropriation of Barbieland offers a brilliant example of ideological critique through discursive parody. Their "patriarchal revolution" is not presented as a coherent political philosophy but as a pastiche of masculine clichés, assembled from popular media and consumer culture.

Linguistically, their new discourse is marked by several telling features:

- **Lexical Simplification:** Reduction to terms of domination ("mine," "win"), possession ("bro"), and simplistic self-definition ("My job is beach").
- **Intertextual Borrowing:** Phrases lifted from action movies ("This is our kingdom now"), business seminars ("Synergy!"), and self-help mantras without underlying ideological coherence.
- **Performative Assertiveness:** Boastful declarations that seem designed more to convince the speakers themselves than to communicate with others.

Visually, their transformation involves appropriating symbols of machismo: horses, leather jackets, trophy displays. The cinematography shifts to mimic genres associated with masculinity—Westerns, corporate thrillers, sports competitions—highlighting the derivative, citational nature of their performance.

Musically, the shift to guitar-heavy rock anthems and pompous orchestral scores sonically underscores their adoption of a grandiose, self-important persona.

This entire sequence functions as a form of ideological unmasking. By exaggerating patriarchal discourse to the point of absurdity, the film reveals its constructedness, its emptiness, and its reliance on performance rather than substance. The comedy arises from the gap between the Kens' inflated rhetoric and their evident insecurity—a gap that exposes the labor required to maintain gendered facades.

#### 4.5 Resolution: Toward More Fluid and Inclusive Discourses

The film's resolution does not involve a return to Barbieland's original perfection nor a complete overthrow of existing structures. Instead, it gestures toward the possibility of more complex, fluid, and inclusive discourses.

Barbie's strategy in confronting the Kens exemplifies what might be termed "discursive judo": rather than rejecting their language outright, she temporarily adopts their terms to expose internal contradictions and create openings for change. This approach reflects a sophisticated understanding of discursive power: transformation often occurs not through outright opposition but through strategic engagement that reworks available linguistic materials.

In the final scenes, characters begin to improvise rather than recite predetermined scripts. The Kens are encouraged to explore identities beyond "beach" and "bro"; Barbie chooses a human existence with all its messiness and uncertainty; even the Mattel executives show glimpses of flexibility. These narrative choices suggest that agency lies not in escaping discourse altogether, but in developing the critical awareness and creative capacity to participate in its ongoing reconstruction.

### 5. Discussion

#### 5.1 Mainstream Cinema as a Space for Metalinguistic Engagement

*Barbie* demonstrates that popular film can serve as a powerful medium for fostering public metallinguistic awareness—the ability to reflect on language as a system that shapes thought and social reality. By making discourse itself a central theme, the film encourages viewers to notice how characters speak, what they are allowed to say, and how language enforces or challenges power structures. This represents a significant development in mainstream cinema's relationship to language, moving beyond transparent storytelling toward more reflexive commentary on communicative practices.

The film's commercial success suggests a substantial public appetite for such engagement. In an era often characterized by polarized discourse and declining trust in linguistic institutions, *Barbie* offers a model for how popular culture might contribute to more reflective public conversations about how we use words, and to what ends.

#### 5.2 Performativity Theory in Popular Form

The film provides an unusually accessible illustration of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. By literalizing the notion that gender is a performance—through characters who are quite literally dolls acting out scripts—*Barbie* makes abstract theoretical concepts tangible and relatable. It shows how gender norms are maintained through repetitive linguistic and bodily acts, and how deviation from these scripts can provoke anxiety, comedy, or crisis.

Importantly, the film extends Butler's framework by emphasizing the possibility of agency within performative constraints. Characters do not simply escape their scripts; they learn to improvise within them, to parody them, to combine them in new ways. This nuanced portrayal avoids both deterministic pessimism and naively optimistic individualism, instead presenting discursive change as a collective, creative, and ongoing process.

### **5.3 Navigating Neoliberal Co-optation**

*Barbie* engages thoughtfully with the phenomenon of neoliberal co-optation—the process by which feminist language and imagery are appropriated for commercial or individualistic ends. The Mattel corporation within the film represents this tendency, seeking to manage Barbie's disruption not through genuine engagement but through public relations and rebranding.

Yet the film avoids simplistic condemnation. Instead, it portrays the complexities of operating within a capitalist media system, acknowledging both the constraints and the possibilities for critique. Gloria's position as a Mattel employee who also articulates feminist critique exemplifies this tension: she is neither purely co-opted nor purely resistant, but operates in the ambivalent space between.

This balanced approach reflects a mature understanding of contemporary feminist politics, one that recognizes the pervasive influence of market logic while still affirming the potential for meaningful resistance and reimagining.

## **6. Conclusion**

*Barbie* (2023) ultimately proposes that linguistic awareness is a crucial form of social literacy. The film traces a journey from unconscious adherence to discursive norms toward more conscious, critical, and creative engagement with language. This journey mirrors broader processes of ideological awakening, suggesting that change often begins with noticing the words we use and the stories we tell.

For scholars in discourse analysis and sociolinguistics, *Barbie* offers a rich case study in multimodal meaning-making. Its careful orchestration of verbal, visual, and sonic elements demonstrates how different semiotic modes can collaborate to produce complex ideological messages. This underscores the importance of multimodal methodologies in contemporary language research, particularly when analyzing media texts.

For educators, the film presents valuable pedagogical possibilities. Its accessible treatment of concepts like performativity, intertextuality, and discursive power makes it an effective resource for introducing critical language awareness in diverse educational contexts. By analyzing *Barbie*, students can learn to identify linguistic patterns, unpack ideological assumptions, and reflect on their own discursive practices.

More broadly, *Barbie's* cultural impact suggests that there is significant public interest in media that engages seriously with language and representation. In a historical moment marked by intense debates about identity, inclusion, and free speech, the film models how popular culture might contribute to more nuanced, reflective public conversations. It reminds us that language is not merely a tool for describing reality, but a material through which realities are built—and potentially rebuilt.

As the film's closing lines suggest, the point is not to achieve perfection, but to embrace the messy, uncertain, and ongoing work of becoming. In linguistic terms, this means recognizing that we are always speaking within inherited structures, but that through critical awareness and collective effort, we can participate in reshaping those structures toward more just and expansive possibilities. *Barbie* thus stands not only as entertainment but as an invitation to reflect on the words we use, the worlds those words create, and our role in imagining new ones.

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