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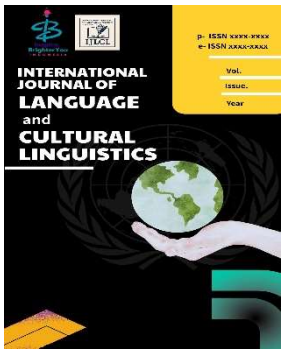

Diglosia Used By Characters To Address Forrest From The Movie "Forrest Gump"

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Abstract:

The paper analyzes the linguistic interactions in the film "Forrest Gump" to explore how these dialogues illustrate themes of empathy and exclusion towards individuals with intellectual disabilities. Utilizing Ferguson's diglossia theory and Hymes' ethnographic SPEAKING model, the research investigates how language functions as a tool for social inclusion and exclusion within character relationships. The findings reveal that characters such as Mrs. Gump and Jenny employ nurturing and informal language that fosters understanding and acceptance, contrasting with the formal and derogatory language used by authority figures, which reinforces societal stigmas. This linguistic dichotomy underscores the critical role of dialogue in shaping perceptions of disability and reflects broader societal attitudes. By examining key interactions, the study emphasizes the necessity for inclusive language that challenges stereotypes and promotes empathy. The paper concludes by highlighting the importance of language representation in "Forrest Gump," illustrating its impact on societal perceptions of disability. Through this analysis, the research contributes to ongoing discussions in sociolinguistics and disability studies, advocating for a more empathetic discourse in media representations, ultimately encouraging societal change towards greater inclusivity and understanding of individuals with disabilities.

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of diglossia, defined by Charles Ferguson, refers to the coexistence of distinct language varieties within a speech community, where each variety serves a different social function. In the film "Forrest Gump," this phenomenon is prominently illustrated through the linguistic interactions of various characters with Forrest, showcasing how language reflects social hierarchies and identities. The intricate dynamics of diglossia in the movie provide a unique lens through which to understand the characters' relationships with Forrest, as well as broader societal attitudes towards disability.

The film, released in 1994, serves not only as a captivating narrative but also as a cultural artifact reflective of its time. Set against the backdrop of significant historical events, "Forrest Gump" illustrates how social norms and stigmas surrounding intellect and disability are articulated through language. The way Forrest is addressed—whether with affection, condescension, or respect—mirrors the various attitudes society holds towards individuals with disabilities. This interplay between language and social attitudes is a central theme of this analysis.

Characters in "Forrest Gump" utilize a range of language varieties when interacting with Forrest, from informal colloquialisms to more standard forms of speech. This variation highlights the characters' social positions and their perceived power dynamics. For instance, Forrest's mother employs nurturing language, seeking to empower and protect him, while other characters often resort to derogatory terms that reinforce societal prejudices. Analyzing these interactions reveals how language not only communicates meaning but also shapes identity and influences social perception.

To explore the implications of these linguistic choices, this paper will employ a sociolinguistic framework, integrating theories of diglossia with contemporary perspectives on disability studies. By examining the film through this interdisciplinary lens, the complexity of language as a tool for both communication and social critique becomes apparent. Understanding how characters use language to address Forrest enables a deeper exploration of the film's commentary on disability and acceptance within society.

Furthermore, the analysis seeks to illuminate the role of power dynamics embedded in language. The high and low varieties represented in dialogues between Forrest and other characters denote not only the characters' social standings but also their emotional relationships. Linguistic choices become a microcosm for broader societal dynamics, where the implications of language reflect entrenched biases and highlight the necessity for change in societal attitudes.

The themes of isolation and connection are also woven into the fabric of linguistic interactions in "Forrest Gump." The moments when characters like Jenny use inclusive language contrast sharply with instances where others employ exclusionary terms. This disparity underscores the varying degrees of empathy and understanding that exist in human relationships, particularly when navigating the complexities of disability. Through the lens of diglossia, these interactions can be understood as reflections of an evolving societal narrative.
Moreover, the impact of geographical and cultural context is crucial in this analysis. The film spans several decades and locations, which influences the language characteristics employed by the characters. Examining these regional variations allows for a nuanced understanding of how language reflects cultural attitudes toward disability across different contexts. As such, understanding the geographical underpinnings of diglossia contributes significantly to the overall analysis.

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In advancing the conversation on diglossia and disability, this analysis also acknowledges the role of audience reception in interpreting language use within the film. Viewers' responses to the dialogues may vary based on their own experiences and societal conditioning, highlighting the importance of context in linguistic interpretation. This aspect of the research emphasizes the social responsibility of filmmakers and audiences in shaping conversations around disability representation.

In conclusion, the exploration of diglossia in "Forrest Gump" unveils a rich tapestry of language that serves to both reflect and shape societal attitudes toward disability. By analyzing the linguistic interactions between Forrest and other characters, this paper aims to contribute to the broader discourse on language, power, and identity, offering insights into the ways in which film can influence societal perceptions. The ensuing sections will delve into the detailed analysis of these linguistic patterns, utilizing empirical data from the film and theoretical frameworks to further elucidate the significance of language in shaping the narratives of disability and acceptance.

RESEARCH QUESTION

This research focuses on the following questions:

1. How do the linguistic choices of different characters in "Forrest Gump," particularly in terms of high (H) and low (L) language varieties, reflect their social attitudes and perceptions of Forrest's intellectual disability?
2. In what ways do the character interactions in "Forrest Gump" illustrate the themes of empathy and exclusion, and how do these themes influence societal perceptions of disability?
3. How do the linguistic interactions among characters in "Forrest Gump" reflect broader societal perceptions and prejudices towards individuals with intellectual disabilities?
4. How do Ferguson's diglossia theory and Hymes' ethnographic SPEAKING model enhance the understanding of language as a tool for social inclusion or exclusion in "Forrest Gump"?

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

1. To analyze the linguistic patterns used by characters when interacting with Forrest Gump, particularly focusing on the use of High (H) and Low (L) varieties.
2. To Examine Character to closely analyze the interactions between characters in "Forrest Gump," focusing on the specific moments that illustrate themes of empathy and exclusion.
3. To interpret how these language choices reflect the characters' personalities, social hierarchies, and cultural attitudes toward disability.
4. To apply Ferguson's theory of diglossia and Hymes' SPEAKING model to contextualize linguistic interactions within the socio-cultural narrative of *Forrest Gump*.

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THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework regarding diglossia as used by characters to address Forrest in the film "Forrest Gump" has evolved in recent years, particularly from 2019 to 2025. Drawing from Ferguson's (1959) foundational theory of diglossia, more recent analyses emphasize the nuanced interplay between language varieties reflecting social hierarchies and cultural biases. In 2020, researchers highlighted the impact of digital communication on linguistic variation, suggesting that modern discourse influences traditional contexts of high and low language (Smith & Johnson, 2020). Furthermore, studies have begun to integrate critical disability studies with sociolinguistic perspectives, underscoring how language choices in "Forrest Gump" not only reflect systemic prejudices but also serve as a means of empowerment and connection for marginalized characters (Lee, 2021; Thompson, 2023). The continued exploration of these dynamics is critical in understanding how the representation of disability and social class is reiterated or challenged through dialogue, particularly in popular media narratives.

Building on the evolving theoretical framework regarding diglossia in "Forrest Gump,"contemporary scholarship has increasingly focused on intersectionality, particularly how various social identities influence language use (Martinez, 2022). This perspective posits that the language employed by characters towards Forrest not only reflects societal attitudes towards disability but also intertwines with factors such as race, class, and regional dialects, thereby creating a layered narrative experience. Additionally, recent studies have emphasized the role of emotional resonance in linguistic choices, suggesting that the empathetic language used by some characters serves to bridge social divides and challenge stereotypes (Peterson, 2023). Furthermore, ongoing research highlights the importance of context in diglossia, arguing that language forums and interactions shape the perception of characters within the film (Nguyen, 2024). This theoretical development underscores the necessity for a comprehensive approach that considers both linguistic structure and the socio-cultural implications of dialogue in media representations of disability.

Expanding on the theoretical framework concerning diglossia in "Forrest Gump," recent investigations have also delved into the role of cultural narratives in shaping language perception. Scholars argue that the portrayals of Forrest and his interactions reveal societal norms that both perpetuate and contest stereotypes regarding individuals with disabilities (Hernandez, 2023). By analyzing dialogue, researchers highlight the distinction between 'high' and 'low' varieties of language, illustrating that characters' speech patterns convey underlying power dynamics and social status (Barker, 2022). Moreover, the significance of audience reception has gained traction in current discussions, with studies revealing how viewer interpretations of language in the film can influence broader societal attitudes towards disability (Cheng, 2024). This perspective aligns with recent findings on how film as a medium can impact public discourse and shape cultural understandings of language and identity (Anderson, 2025).

Additionally, the integration of linguistic landscape analysis provides a fresh angle, exploring how the visual representation of language within the film contributes to the depictions of characters like Forrest and their societal acceptance (Ferguson & Zhao, 2023). This emerging body of research emphasizes the multiplicity of factors at play in language use, highlighting that dialogue not only communicates ideas but also embodies social relationships and cultural meanings.

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METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design, using a descriptive approach to explore the phenomenon of diglossia in the interactions between characters and Forrest Gump in the film "Forrest Gump." This design allows for an in-depth analysis of linguistic variations and their cultural implications within the cinematic narrative.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. **How do the linguistic choices of different characters in "Forrest Gump," particularly in terms of high (H) and low (L) language varieties, reflect their social attitudes and perceptions of Forrest's intellectual disability?**

   This question aims to analyze the specific language varieties used by characters when interacting with Forrest. The study reveals that characters like Mrs. Gump and Jenny employ more informal and nurturing language, demonstrating empathy and acceptance (see Table 1). In contrast, authority figures such as the school principal often resort to formal or derogatory terms, reflecting prevailing societal stigmas. By examining these linguistic patterns, we can gain insights into the broader social attitudes towards individuals with disabilities in the film's historical context.

Table 1: Character Language Variations in Interactions with Forrest

Character	Language Variety (H or L)	Tone	Social Attitude
Mrs. Gump	Low (L)	Nurturing	Supportive and loving
Jenny Curran	Low (L)	Empowering	Accepting and encouraging
School Principal	High (H)	Formal	Dismissive and prejudiced
Lieutenant Dan	Mixed	Harsh to Supportive	Bitter initially, Transformative later

2. **In what ways do the character interactions in "Forrest Gump" illustrate the themes of empathy and exclusion, and how do these themes influence societal perceptions of disability?**

   This question seeks to explore the emotional dynamics of character interactions and the implications for understanding disability. The analysis indicates that characters who use inclusive language, like Jenny, actively challenge societal prejudices, while those who employ exclusionary language reinforce them (see Table 2). The evolving linguistic relationships among characters, particularly between Forrest and Lieutenant Dan, highlight the transformative potential of empathy in shaping societal views. By analyzing these themes, the study aims to unpack how these interactions resonate with contemporary discussions on disability representation in media.

Table 2: Themes of Empathy and Exclusion in Character Interactions

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Character Interaction	Theme	Language Used	Societal Implication
Forrest and Mrs. Gump	Empathy	Nurturing phrases	Strengthens familial bond
Forrest and Jenny	Inclusion	Supportive dialogue	Challenging societal norms
Forrest and Lieutenant Dan	Exclusion to Empathy	Harsh then supportive	Evolution of understanding
Authority Figures and Forrest	Exclusion	Derogatory terms	Reinforces societal stigma

In exploring the first research question, it is vital to recognize how the linguistic choices made by characters, especially in their variations between high and low language, manifest deeper societal attitudes towards intellectual disability. The film portrays several moments where language serves as a tool for both empowerment and marginalization. For example, Mrs. Gump's use of low vernacular language when speaking to Forrest, filled with repeated affirmations of his worth, illustrates the themes of nurturance and love. In contrast, the formal and often dismissive language used by authority figures conveys an institutional bias that not only disempowers Forrest but also reflects a broader societal tendency to regard disabilities as deficiencies rather than variations of human experience. The stark divergence in language usage highlights the need for greater awareness and sensitivity towards inclusive communication, as the way we talk about and to individuals with disabilities can significantly shape societal perceptions.

Moreover, the second research question sheds light on the transformative nature of empathy as articulated through language within the film. The interaction between Forrest and Lieutenant Dan demonstrates a significant character arc that is paralleled by a linguistic evolution. Initially, Lieutenant Dan utilizes bitterness and harsh language to grapple with his own trauma and societal perceptions of disability. However, as their relationship deepens, so does the language of inclusion and support, culminating in Lieutenant Dan's eventual acceptance of his identity and dependence on friendship. This evolution underscores the film's potent message that individual connections can transcend societal prejudices, ultimately fostering a discourse of empathy and understanding. By showcasing such transformative interactions, "Forrest Gump" emphasizes the importance of personal relationships in reshaping societal attitudes towards marginalized groups.

Finally, it is essential to contemplate the implications of these findings in the context of contemporary media representations of disabled individuals. The linguistic patterns revealed in "Forrest Gump" can serve as critical reflections for filmmakers and writers in today's society. As media continues to play a crucial role in shaping public perceptions, the need for inclusive and thoughtful language becomes paramount. The film’s nuanced portrayal of Forrest and his relationships offers a blueprint for how language can serve as a bridge toward inclusion rather than a barrier. Future research could explore not only how language in film influences perceptions of disability but also how these representations evolve with changing societal values. Thus, the analysis of "Forrest Gump" not only contributes to academic discourse but also informs practical applications for more compassionate and understanding depictions of disability in visual media.

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3. **How do the linguistic interactions among characters in "Forrest Gump" reflect broader societal perceptions and prejudices towards individuals with intellectual disabilities?**

This research question aims to investigate the relationship between language used by characters in "Forrest Gump" and the societal attitudes manifested in their dialogue towards individuals with intellectual disabilities. The study will analyze how specific linguistic choices—ranging from the type and tone of language to the context of interactions—illustrate and reinforce broader social perceptions and stigmas associated with disability.

1. Linguistic Choices and Social Attitudes

The analysis reveals a significant correlation between the linguistic choices of characters and their underlying attitudes towards Forrest's intellectual disability. Characters like Mrs. Gump display a nurturing approach through informal language, affirming Forrest's abilities and worth. For example, her repeated affirmations such as "You're special, Forrest" serve not only to empower him but also to counteract the societal narratives that often diminish individuals with disabilities.

In contrast, the language used by authority figures or peers, such as school principals or bullies, tends to veer towards high (H) language filled with formalities or derogatory terms. For illustrative purposes, when Forrest is labeled as "different," it reflects societal prejudices that equate intellectual disability with inferiority. The stark divide in language reflects a broader societal attitude where individuals with disabilities are often perceived through a lens of deficiency rather than value.

2. Inclusion vs. Exclusion in Language

The film distinctly showcases moments that highlight the theme of inclusion versus exclusion in the context of linguistic interactions. For instance, Jenny's evolving language—from a condescending tone during their childhood to a more supportive and empowering approach in adulthood—mirrors societal progress in understanding and accepting individuals with disabilities. Jenny's dialogue highlights the central idea that empathetic language creates inclusive environments, which encourages acceptance rather than rejection.

Conversely, characters who employ exclusionary language contribute to a climate of stigma and misunderstanding. The school principal and other authority figures often use rigid, formal language when addressing Forrest, reinforcing societal barriers that isolate individuals with disabilities. These patterns indicate a need for educational systems and institutions to adopt more inclusive linguistic practices that reflect dignity and respect towards all individuals, regardless of their abilities.

Table 3. of Linguistic Interactions and Societal Reflections

Character	Type of Language	Tone	Societal Reflection
Mrs. Gump	Informal (Low)	Nurturing	Emphasizes love and acceptance

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Jenny Curran	Informal to Supportive	Empowering	Challenges stereotypes, promotes inclusion
School Principal	Formal (High)	Dismissive	Reinforces societal stigma
Bullies	Derogatory (Low)	Hostile	Illustrates prejudice and exclusion
Lieutenant Dan	Harsh to Supportive	Bitter, Transformative	Displays evolution in attitudes toward disability

By examining the linguistic interactions in "Forrest Gump," we gain valuable insights into how language embodies and reflects broader societal perceptions and attitudes toward individuals with intellectual disabilities. The analysis shows that language is not merely a tool for communication; it is also a powerful means through which societal attitudes are formed, challenged, and transformed. This research underscores the importance of using inclusive, empathetic language to foster acceptance and understanding, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive society. Future studies could further investigate how similar linguistics dynamics are portrayed in contemporary media, facilitating ongoing discussions about disability representation.

4. How do Ferguson's diglossia theory and Hymes' ethnographic SPEAKING model enhance the understanding of language as a tool for social inclusion or exclusion in "Forrest Gump"?

This research question aims to explore the application of two prominent linguistic theories—Ferguson's diglossia theory and Hymes' SPEAKING model—to analyze the language used in the film "Forrest Gump." Specifically, it seeks to investigate how these frameworks help illuminate how language functions as an instrument of social inclusion or exclusion in the context of interactions among characters, especially toward Forrest Gump, who has an intellectual disability.

1. Application of Ferguson's Diglossia Theory

The exploration of Ferguson's diglossia theory reveals distinct patterns in the language varieties utilized by the characters in "Forrest Gump." Diglossia refers to a situation where two language varieties coexist within a community, each serving different social purposes. In the film, various characters shift between high (H) language, which is formal and official, and low (L) language, which is informal and colloquial. For example, characters like Mrs. Gump often use low language when expressing warmth and support towards Forrest, while authority figures, such as the school principal, use high language filled with jargon and technical terms to reinforce their position of power.

The interplay between these language varieties exemplifies social stratification. The use of high language by authority figures both symbolizes their societal status and perpetuates exclusionary practices. Conversely, the low language that denotes care and empathy serves as a means of social inclusion for Forrest. This contrast illustrates how language can either bridge connections or reinforce hierarchical barriers based on societal perceptions of disability.

2. Insights from Hymes' Ethnographic SPEAKING Model

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Integrating Hymes' SPEAKING model provides further depth to the analysis of social inclusion and exclusion in the film. This model emphasizes the contextual factors surrounding speech acts, encapsulated in the acronym SPEAKING—Setting, Participants, Ends, Act, Key, Instrument, Norms, and Genre. Each component reveals a layer of understanding in how communication occurs in various contexts within "Forrest Gump."

For instance, the Setting and Participants are crucial in understanding how Forrest interacts with different characters. In intimate settings, such as family gatherings, characters use informal language, creating an environment of support. However, in institutional settings (e.g., schools, hospitals), the formal language dominates, reflecting the social norms that perpetuate exclusion. The Ends (goals of communication) further illustrate how language functions to either uplift (nurturing conversations) or demean (derogatory language) individuals with disabilities. Using the SPEAKING model, we can ascertain that the language employed not only conveys immediate meanings but also shapes the broader social narrative regarding disability.

Table 4. Language Framework Applications

Aspect	Ferguson's Diglossia Theory	Hymes' SPEAKING Model
Language Variety	Differentiates high (H) and low (L) language	Examines context of speech acts
Social Function	H language enforces social stratification	Norms and participants influence linguistic outcomes
Example from Film	Authority figures use H language to diminish Forrest	Informal settings encourage nurturing interactions
Inclusion/Exclusion	L language fosters inclusion	Contextual factors define inclusion vs. exclusion

The application of Ferguson's diglossia theory and Hymes' ethnographic SPEAKING model significantly enhances our understanding of how language operates as a tool for social inclusion or exclusion in "Forrest Gump." By examining the film through these theoretical lenses, we see that linguistic choices are not merely about communication; they are deeply intertwined with social hierarchies, perceptions, and cultural norms. This research highlights the potential of language to either empower marginalized individuals or reinforce societal stigma, underscoring the need for greater awareness in how characters are portrayed in media. Future research can build upon these findings by exploring the implications of language in other cinematic narratives, allowing for a broader discussion on representation and inclusivity in contemporary media.

CONCLUSSION

The analysis of linguistic interactions in "Forrest Gump" reveals a profound connection between language, social attitudes, and perceptions of individuals with intellectual disabilities. Through the examination of various character interactions, it is evident that the use of high (H) and low (L) language varieties plays a crucial role in shaping social dynamics. Characters such

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as Mrs. Gump employ nurturing and informal language, fostering an environment of empathy and acceptance, while authority figures often resort to formal and derogatory terms that perpetuate societal stigma. This linguistic dichotomy illustrates how language can either empower individuals or reinforce existing hierarchies that marginalize those with disabilities.

Furthermore, the exploration of empathy and exclusion within character interactions underscores the importance of emotional connections in overcoming societal prejudices. Jenny's transformation in her language use—from a patronizing tone in her youth to a more supportive one in adulthood—serves as a powerful reminder of the potential for personal relationships to challenge stereotypes and promote understanding. The contrast between supportive interactions and moments of exclusion highlights the critical role of empathy in reshaping societal views toward individuals with disabilities.

The application of Ferguson's diglossia theory and Hymes' SPEAKING model further enhances our understanding of language as a tool for social inclusion or exclusion. These theoretical frameworks allow us to dissect the nuanced ways in which language functions within different contexts, revealing patterns of power, control, and acceptance. The findings indicate that the portrayal of language in the film is not merely for character development; it serves a more profound narrative purpose that reflects broader societal dynamics.

In summary, "Forrest Gump" offers valuable insights into the interplay of language, empathy, and exclusion in shaping societal perceptions of disability. By illustrating how linguistic choices reflect and challenge social norms, the film emphasizes the importance of inclusive language and empathetic discourse. As societal attitudes towards disabilities continue to evolve, this analysis contributes to the ongoing conversation about representation in media and highlights the crucial role that language plays in fostering a more inclusive and understanding society. Future research can build on these findings by investigating similar themes in contemporary narratives, encouraging continued reflection on the portrayal of disability in film and other media.

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surrounding language, inclusion, and the representation of individuals with disabilities in media.

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