1

Introduction: Exploring Gender Issues in Fairy Tales

1.1 Introduction

The image of the little girl in her red hood, as demonstrated by countless re-writings over a span of 300 years or more, has been a powerful force in the socialization process of generations of children in many different countries. It has been the object of much study and a subject of feminist literature, which has especially concentrated, however, on changes in the content of the story over the years rather than the way in which language has been used to express such changes.

Moving from the implicit conviction that there is always more than one way of talking about the same event and that the choice made from all available possibilities is therefore significant, this study describes a critical theory which, by means of the analysis of both social and discursive change, brings into relief the reciprocal relationship between changes in the content, changes in the language and changes in the wider sociocultural context in order to expose the functioning of ideology in the way texts mean.

Both the ‘language’ and the ‘gender’ parts of the book’s title are important: my analysis uses linguistics to raise awareness of the way gender differences work in the language of the texts, so that the reader becomes aware not only of the writer’s power to position her/him through certain linguistic choices, but also of the power s/he has to accept or reconstruct the identity thus given to her/him. The approach used here is different from other forms of text analysis in many respects. Firstly, it is the first time an attempt has been made to draw together into one methodology various contemporary theories and approaches that complement each other: the result is a critical tool that is able to identify and describe the powerful socializing function of language.
Secondly, it focuses on the linguistic dimension of the texts rather than on their content, taking the reader through a multilayered analysis that moves from the consideration of individual words to higher-level text structures and aspects of discourse. Finally, the methodology is applied to fairy tales, in particular to a number of versions of the same story and, through a comparison of their linguistic texture over the centuries, the book is able to investigate the development of the discourse of gender relations over time.

The purpose of this introduction is to give a synopsis of the methodology applied to the different texts, introduce the data, and explain how the book is organized. I am fully aware of the fact that the various theories and approaches brought together here could have been exploited to a much greater extent to provide more detailed analysis in each of the fields addressed. But the book does not claim to be exhaustive: it would not be possible with such a large number of texts. Its aim is rather to show the richness of the perspectives that open up through such an exploration: to bring the reader’s attention to the different ways in which the expressive potential of the language has been drawn upon to perpetuate a male-dominated arrangement, and how it has been manipulated by those writers who wanted to counter it. The hope is that this awareness may help generate new discursive practices, and, as a consequence, contribute to a new social world. As Stubbs says,

> It is not that society first exists and is then reflected passively by language. Language itself is a social practice, and language actively reproduces and transforms society. [...] Language can, perhaps in relatively modest domains, be actively changed by human agency. And these changes restructure social relations. (Stubbs, 1996a, p. 90)

### 1.2 Models of text analysis

Although the book draws upon a variety of approaches, which I discuss in the opening paragraph of each chapter, my main descriptive and analytical tools are Halliday’s functional grammar (1985, 1994), Fairclough’s three-dimensional framework of analysis as it is developed in *Discourse and Social Change* (1992b), and Van Leeuwen’s theory of social actors (1995 and 1996). I have also largely availed myself of quantitative analysis which, although not a method of analysis in itself, cannot only be fruitfully used to support other forms of analysis, but also provide insights into a text on its own.