Representations of Gender and Agency in the *Harry Potter* Series

*Sally Hunt*

**Introduction**

Gender is an all-pervasive and extremely influential construct in the lives of individuals (Taylor, 2003). In children’s literature, we find a reflection of the attitudes towards gender prevalent in a given society at a particular time (Peterson and Lach, 1990). Therefore the study of how gender is represented in children’s literature can make a useful contribution to our understanding of how choices in language use support particular discourses, ‘broad constitutive systems of meaning’ (Sunderland, 2004: 6) or ‘ways of seeing the world’ (op cit: 28). These representations in turn perpetuate prevailing gendered power relations in that society, as research into children’s literature has shown (Thompson and Sealey, 2007). Corpus Linguistics offers a degree of objectivity and efficiency not possible in manual ideological analysis, as well as a set of tools particularly useful for the lexical analysis of considerable quantities of text. In this chapter, I report on my analysis of gendered discourses in the *Harry Potter* series by J. K. Rowling, focussing on patterns around grammatical agency in the books.

Books written for children are just one of several sources of cultural and ideological information ‘about socially sanctioned relationship patterns and about social constructs’ for children (Wharton, 2005: 239) but their importance is evident in the interest that they arouse in educators, parents and researchers. There is a plethora of research into the multiple effects of children’s books on their young readers, much of it concluding that ‘children’s literature can positively influence gender attitudes’ (Trepanier-Street and Romatowski, 1999: 158). To investigate the contemporary representation of gender in children’s literature written in English, the *Harry Potter* series is a good candidate, with record sales and massive popularity amongst both child and adult readers. Unlike previous studies into gender representation in children’s fiction, which tend to focus on plot or on easily quantifiable aspects like the numbers of female and male characters and their occupations, this study addresses more subtle aspects of the text and the discourses...
supported by it, in this case body parts and the uses their female and male owners put them to, via the integration of corpus linguistics into a critical discourse analysis. This methodological combination opens up the possibility of analysing much larger quantities of data than the analyst is able to address in traditional Critical Discourse Analysis and provides statistical support for interpretations, without sacrificing social sensitivity and the micro-level nuances of discourse analysis. This chapter continues with an outline of the theoretical context of this study, pointing to previous research in the area, after which I describe the practical aspects of the methodology employed. My emphasis is on the analysis afforded by the synergistic research method and the implications of my findings for our understanding of the representation of gender in children’s fiction.

Context

The role of language in reflecting cultural norms is well established, and children’s literature is no exception. Indeed, Thompson and Sealey (2007: 3), in reviewing research into fiction for children conducted over the past two decades, comment that ‘these texts are inevitably suffused with ideology’. Thus what children’s books say about social constructs, including gender, is of concern because they are instrumental in constructing reality for the children who read them (Wharton, 2005). Fantasy, for example, provides readers with ‘texts of meanings’ of femininity and heterosexuality that they may draw on to understand and interpret their place in the social world’ (Jackson, 2001: 306). These ideologically charged texts make reading ‘a particularly influential activity in terms of children’s learning of societal expectations’ (Wharton, 2005: 239). The iteration and reiteration of particular ideologies regarding gender in a popular series like Harry Potter could have a significant impact on the kinds of masculinity and femininity that child readers have to choose from in constructing their own identities, hence my interest in revealing just what options are offered by the representations of various characters in the books.

Research into the representation of the body demonstrates the salience of gender in the representation of physical identity as well as the tendency for female and male bodies to be associated with different uses and to be evaluated in terms of different criteria (c.f. Hammers, 2005; Gill and Herdieckerhoff, 2006; Jeffries, 2007). Although the fact that literature reflects society suggests the need for action to correct the representation of women as second class citizens, it is the role of literature in perpetuating ideological constructs that is of most concern. The prior existence of dominant ideologies around gender strengthens the efficacy of those discourses expressed in books for children (Wharton, 2005) and the reiteration of particular representations allows the continued influence of existing ideologies, which explains the importance of this research.