



Children's Perceptions of Language Used in Animated Cartoons: A Case of Dodoma City, Tanzania

Mary Saki

St John's University of Tanzania, Dodoma

Email: maryasaki2@gmail.com

Abstract: *In the era of globalization and digital media, animated cartoons have become a major part of children's daily entertainment and learning experiences. This study investigated how children in Dodoma City, Tanzania, perceive the language used in popular animated cartoons, specifically examining how they categorize such language as "good" or "bad" and the reasons underpinning their judgments. The study was informed by Social Learning Theory (SLT), which posits that children acquire behaviors and attitudes through observation and imitation, and by Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which explores how language conveys ideologies and power relations. A qualitative case study design was used, involving focus group discussions with 20 children aged 5–10 and semi-structured interviews with 10 children aged 11–14 who regularly watch animated cartoons such as Ubongo Kids, Ben 10, Cinderella, Tom and Jerry, and Adventure Time. Findings revealed that children's evaluations were shaped by several factors, including language familiarity (preference for Kiswahili), humor and cleverness (sarcasm), catchiness and memorability (slangs), visual and gestural expressions (non-verbal language), and moral conduct of characters. Some children relied more on characters' actions than verbal expressions, while a few perceived all cartoon language as inherently "good" simply because cartoons are made for children. These results suggest that while many children demonstrate emerging critical thinking in interpreting media language, others lack evaluative filters and may uncritically absorb inappropriate content. The study highlights the importance of parental mediation and media literacy education to foster children's critical evaluation of media language.*

Keywords: *Children; Animated cartoons; Language; Social Learning Theory; Critical Discourse Analysis; Media literacy*

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1. Introduction

Globally, animated cartoons have become one of the most influential forms of media consumed by children. In the United States and Europe, children spend an average of 2–3 hours daily watching animated programs (Common Sense Media, 2022). Such exposure shapes their language, attitudes, and social behaviors (Bandura, 2004). Increasingly, international production houses are including diverse characters, including those representing LGBTQ

identities, reflecting broader social changes (Von Sikorski et al., 2023).

In Africa, children's access to television and digital streaming platforms is rapidly growing, especially with the spread of affordable smartphones and internet access (GSMA, 2023). Studies from Kenya, Nigeria, and Ghana (Kidenda, 2018; Churcher et al., 2022) show that animated cartoons affect children's cognitive and language development but also introduce them to foreign cultural values.

In Tanzania, the rapid growth of mobile internet access has exposed children to a flood of foreign cartoons via YouTube, Netflix, and other platforms. While local productions such as *Ubongo Kids* emphasize educational content, many imported cartoons include language and behaviors that may conflict with Tanzanian cultural norms (University of Maryland, 2017). Yet, little is known about how Tanzanian children actually interpret and judge the language they encounter. Understanding their perceptions is vital for developing strategies to guide safe media consumption.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Despite the increasing exposure of Tanzanian children to animated cartoons, there are little empirical studies that explored how they perceive the language used in these cartoons. Many parents assume all cartoons are safe and educational, but evidence from other contexts shows cartoons can also promote sarcasm, stereotypes, and even inappropriate ideologies (Rai et al., 2017; Wijethilaka, 2020). Without understanding how children judge cartoon language, it is impossible to know whether they can critically filter harmful content. This gap leaves children vulnerable to uncritical absorption of ideologies that may conflict with cultural norms and positive development. This paper therefore explored how children in Dodoma perceive the words used in popular animated cartoons as good or bad, and why.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Empirical Review

Several studies worldwide have examined how animated cartoons influence children's language use, attitudes, and perceptions, offering valuable insights into how children interpret the language they encounter in media.

In Europe, a study by De Leeuw et al., (2015) in the Netherlands investigated the role of animated television programs in shaping young children's social perceptions and gender attitudes. The study involved content analysis of popular European cartoons and focus group interviews with children aged 6–12. The researchers found that children frequently adopted stereotypical gendered language and expressions used by cartoon characters, which shaped their beliefs about gender roles. This finding highlights how children use language in cartoons as cues for social norms and what they perceive as “appropriate” or “good” behavior.

Similarly, Pereira and Moura (2020) conducted a study in Portugal examining how exposure to humorous and

sarcastic language in animated cartoons affected children's emotional and linguistic development. Using classroom observations and language tests with 150 primary school pupils, the study revealed that children exposed to sarcastic cartoon dialogue became more likely to use sarcastic remarks in their daily interactions, often misapplying them in inappropriate contexts. This shows how children imitate stylistic features of cartoon language even without fully understanding their pragmatic meaning, reinforcing the need to explore how children evaluate such language as good or bad.

Where, in America, Calzo and Ward (2009) carried out a study in the United States to examine how animated media content contributed to children's attitudes towards sexuality and gender expression. The researchers conducted a longitudinal survey of 1,200 adolescents and content-analyzed popular American animated series. They found those children who regularly watched shows with diverse or gender-fluid characters tended to normalize such language and expressions; demonstrating that early media exposure strongly influences how children interpret and adopt social language cues. This shows that children's judgments about what is acceptable language are shaped by media portrayals.

In Africa, Churcher et al., (2022) conducted a study in Ghana on the effects of animated cartoons on children's language acquisition and behavior. They used interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations involving 100 children aged 5–10 and their teachers. The study found that while cartoons enhanced vocabulary and creativity, they also introduced slang, code-switching, and aggressive expressions that children often repeated uncritically. The authors concluded that children need adult guidance to differentiate between appropriate and inappropriate language from cartoons. This directly supports the focus of this paper by showing that African children, like their peers globally, actively adopt language from cartoons but often lack critical filters to judge its appropriateness.

Generally, literature indicates that children worldwide imitate cartoon language, but their understanding of its meaning or appropriateness varies depending on cultural context, parental guidance, and developmental stage. However, few studies have specifically examined how children in Tanzania evaluate cartoon language as good or bad, which is the focus of this paper.

2.2 Theoretical Review

This study is guided by Social Learning Theory (SLT), developed by Albert Bandura in the 1960s. SLT explains how people, especially children, learn new behaviors and language by observing, imitating, and modeling others.

Bandura's Bobo doll experiment demonstrated that children imitate behaviors they see rewarded, particularly when performed by admired models. The theory assumes that learning occurs not only through direct reinforcement but also through cognitive processes such as attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation. This makes SLT highly relevant to this study, as children often adopt the words, tone, and expressions used by animated characters they admire. When children label certain cartoon language as "good," they are likely responding to its association with positive or powerful characters, which reflects the observational learning process.

In addition, this study draws on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), pioneered by Norman Fairclough, Teun van Dijk, and Ruth Wodak. CDA views language as a form of social practice that carries ideologies and reflects power relations within society. It assumes that discourse shapes social reality, embeds cultural values, and influences how people think and act. CDA emphasizes that language cannot be separated from the cultural, historical, and political contexts in which it is produced and consumed. Applying CDA to this study enables a critical examination of how the language in animated cartoons conveys particular cultural assumptions, moral messages, or stereotypes that shape children's judgments of what is "good" or "bad" language.

Together, SLT and CDA provide a complementary framework for this paper. SLT explains how children acquire language from cartoons through observation and imitation, while CDA explains what meanings and ideologies that language carries and why children interpret it as good or bad within their sociocultural context. This dual framework is essential for understanding how children in Dodoma make sense of the language in animated cartoons and the implications of their interpretations for socialization and cultural values.

2.3 Objective of the Paper

To explore the views held by children in relation to the words used in popular animated cartoons as "good" or "bad" from what they see and why.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study employed a qualitative case study design, which is appropriate when the researcher seeks an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences within their real-life context (Yin, 2014). Unlike experimental or survey designs that focus on quantifiable outcomes, the

case study design allowed the researcher to explore how children interpret cartoon language in their natural environments. The design was also chosen because it accommodates multiple data sources, such as interviews, focus groups, and document analysis, which enables triangulation and strengthens validity (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Dodoma City was selected as the study site because of its rapidly expanding access to digital media and high rates of mobile device ownership among families (TCRA, 2023). These characteristics made it likely to find children who regularly consume animated cartoons. The contextual focus on one city is consistent with the logic of case studies, which emphasize depth over breadth (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

3.2 Sampling and Sample Size

The study used purposive sampling to select 30 children in Dodoma City who regularly watch animated cartoons, as they could provide rich insights on the topic (Palinkas et al., 2015). The sample comprised 20 children aged 5–10 (10 boys and 10 girls) who participated in two focus group discussions, and 10 children aged 11–14 (5 boys and 5 girls) who participated in individual semi-structured interviews. This sample size was guided by the principle of data saturation, which was reached when no new themes emerged from the data (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Although relatively small, the sample was appropriate for a qualitative case study, where the goal is depth and richness of data rather than statistical generalization (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

3.3 Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through focus group discussions (FGDs), semi-structured interviews, and brief media content analysis to enable triangulation and enhance credibility (Denzin, 1978). Two FGDs were conducted with 20 children aged 5–10 (10 boys and 10 girls) to encourage interactive discussions, while 10 individual interviews were held with children aged 11–14 (5 boys and 5 girls) to obtain more reflective and detailed responses (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). All sessions were conducted in Kiswahili, using open-ended questions about the language children liked or disliked in cartoons and their reasons. Additionally, selected clips from popular cartoons mentioned by participants; such as *Ubongo Kids*, *Ben 10*, and *Tom and Jerry* were analyzed to understand the language features children referred to (Bowen, 2009). Parental consent and child assent were obtained before data collection, and discussions were held in safe, child-friendly environments.

3.4 Validity and Reliability

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, several strategies were employed in line with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for qualitative research. Credibility was enhanced through triangulation of data sources; focus group discussions, interviews, and media content analysis used for cross-verification of emerging themes (Denzin, 1978). Member checking was also conducted by sharing preliminary interpretations with a few participants to confirm that the researcher's understanding reflected their actual views.

Transferability was supported by providing thick descriptions of the research context, participants, and procedures, enabling readers to determine the applicability of findings to other settings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Dependability was ensured by keeping a clear audit trail of all research activities, including data collection guides, transcripts, and coding frameworks, so that another researcher could follow the process and arrive at similar conclusions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Finally, confirmability was addressed through reflexivity, where the researcher kept notes on potential biases and reflected on how their background could influence interpretation of children's responses. These measures collectively strengthened the validity and reliability (or trustworthiness) of the study and ensured that the findings accurately represent children's perceptions of cartoon language.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from St. John's University of Tanzania. Informed consent was obtained from parents/guardians, and verbal assent from children. Anonymity and confidentiality were assured by using pseudonyms and reporting data in aggregate form. Children were informed they could withdraw at any time without penalty. These procedures align with ethical guidelines for research with children (Alderson & Morrow, 2020).

3.6 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed thematically following the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), guided by principles of Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2001). First, notes from focus group discussions and interviews were expanded into full Kiswahili transcripts and translated into English. The researcher then repeatedly read the transcripts to familiarize with the data, coded meaningful statements about how children judged cartoon language, and grouped similar codes into broader categories such as sarcasm,

slang, Kiswahili use, non-verbal expressions, and moral judgments. These categories were further interpreted through a CDA lens to uncover the cultural meanings, values, and ideologies underpinning children's views (van Dijk, 2016). Findings from interviews, FGDs, and media content analysis were compared for consistency, and member checking was done with a few participants to ensure accuracy of interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This process produced coherent themes that captured how children perceive cartoon language as "good" or "bad."

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Familiarity and Cultural Relevance

The findings revealed that, many children preferred cartoons that used Kiswahili and reflected Tanzanian culture. They said it made the content easy to understand and relevant to their daily lives. One child explained:

"Naipenda Ubongo Kids kwa sababu wanaongea Kiswahili na ninaelewa kila kitu wanachosema. Wanaongea kama walimu wetu shuleni na wanatufundisha mambo yanayotokea Tanzania." (FGD with children on August, 2025).

Literally meaning:

"I like Ubongo Kids because they speak Kiswahili and I understand everything they say. They speak like our teachers at school and they teach us things that happen in Tanzania." (FGD with children, August 2025)

Another child added that:

"Cartoons za Kiswahili zinanifaa zaidi... zinanifundisha na si lazima nitafsiri kichwani. Nikisikia neno jipya, ninaweza kuuliza walimu au wazazi wangu kwa sababu ni Kiswahili." (Interview with child C on August 2025).

Literally meaning:

"Kiswahili cartoons suit me more... they teach me and I don't have to translate in my head. When I hear a new word, I can ask my teachers or my parents because it is in Kiswahili." (Interview with child C, August 2025)

These statements show that children value language they can immediately comprehend and connect to their environment. They see local language as both accessible and educational. This echoes findings by Churcher et al., (2022) in Ghana, who found that children engaged more with content in local languages. It supports Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory, which states that children model language from characters they identify with, highlighting the importance of culturally relevant content.

4.2 Humor and Sarcasm

The findings from FGD and interview revealed that children expressed admiration for characters who spoke humorously or sarcastically. They associated such language with cleverness and intelligence. During FGD one child explained:

“Ninapenda yule binti wa Ubongo Kids anapoongea kwa utani, anakuwa mwerevu sana. Anajibu kwa maneno ya haraka na watu wanashangaa, na inafanya kila mtu kucheka.” (FGD with children on August 2025)

Literally meaning:

“I like that girl from Ubongo Kids when she speaks jokingly, she becomes very clever. She answers with quick words and people get surprised, and it makes everyone laugh.” (FGD with children, August 2025)

Another child spearheaded the view:

“Cinderella anajibu kwa maneno ya utani wakati mtu anamsema vibaya, inafurahisha sana. Napenda jinsi anavyobadilisha maneno vibaya kuwa mazuri na watu wanashindwa kumjibu.” (Interview with a child B on August 2025)

Literally meaning:

“Cinderella responds with joking words when someone speaks badly to her, it is very amusing. I like how she turns bad words into good ones and people fail to reply to her.” (Interview with a child B in August 2025)

These views show that children equate humor with mental agility and social power. This resonates with Pereira and Moura's (2020) study in Portugal, where children exposed to sarcastic cartoon dialogue began using sarcasm themselves. While humor can increase engagement (Martin, 2019), CDA warns that sarcasm may normalize subtle disrespect if left unexamined (Fairclough, 2001). The admiration expressed here suggests children might imitate sarcastic speech without understanding its social consequences.

4.3 Catchy Slangs and Expressions

The findings revealed that, the catchy slangs and expression help them to bond with peers. Children were drawn to slang and catchy expressions, saying they were fun to say and helped them bond with peers. One child explained:

“Ninajifunza maneno mapya kama ‘balaa’ au ‘mambo vipi’ na naongea na marafiki wangu. Wakisikia nimetumia maneno ya cartoon wanashangaa na wananiona niko vizuri.” (Interview with a child G on August 2025).

Literally meaning:

“I learn new words like ‘balaa’ or ‘mambo vipi’ and I talk with my friends. When they hear that I used words from cartoons, they are surprised and see that I am doing well.” (Interview with a child G in August 2025)

From FGD one child expressed:

“Tom and Jerry wanaongea maneno ya haraka haraka, yanapendeza sana. Nikisikia maneno mapya ninayakariri haraka halafu nawasimulia wadogo zangu nyumbani.” (FGD with children on August 2025).

Literally meaning:

“Tom and Jerry speak very fast words, it is very delightful. When I hear new words, I quickly repeat them and then tell my younger siblings at home.” (FGD with children in August 2025)

These comments illustrate how children value novelty and social capital gained from using cartoon language. They

see such language as playful and identity-affirming among peers. Kidenda (2018) found similar patterns in Kenya, where children adopted slang from cartoons to show social belonging. SLT explains this as modeling admired characters (Bandura, 2004). However, such imitation can also encourage code-switching and poor grammar if not guided by adults.

4.4 Non-verbal Communication and Visual Language

The findings revealed that, some younger children enjoy cartoons even when they didn't understand the words, because they could interpret meaning from facial expressions and actions. During FGD one child explained:

“Wakionekana wanakimbia na kupigana, naelewa kuwa wanagombana hata kama hajasema kitu. Ninapenda kuona sura zao zinabadilika kama wana hasira au wanafurahi.” (FGD with children on August 2025).

Literally meaning:

“When they appear to be running and fighting, I understand that they are arguing even if nothing has been said. I like seeing their faces change when they are angry or happy.” (FGD with children in August 2025)

During interview a child B explained:

“Naangalia uso wa mhusika... kama amekasirika najua amekasirika. Wakati mwingine nacheka kwa sababu naona tu alivyoanguka na hakuna mtu amesema kitu.” (Interview with child B on August 2025)

Literally meaning:

“I look at the character's face... if he is angry I know he is angry. Sometimes I laugh just because I see how he fell and no one said anything.” (Interview with child B in August 2025)

These narratives show that children rely heavily on visual cues to derive meaning, sometimes even more than on spoken words. This is consistent with De Leeuw et al. (2015) in the Netherlands, who found that young children

decode visual emotion cues in cartoons. While visuals enhance understanding and imagination (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021), uncritical viewing may normalize aggressive non-verbal behavior as humorous, underscoring the need for adult mediation.

4.5 Moral Judgement Based on Actions

From the findings, it was also revealed that, some children judged language as good or bad based on the moral behavior of the characters who used it. They linked good language to kindness and cooperation, and bad language to aggression and disrespect. However, a few assumed all cartoon language must be good. During interview, one child explained:

“Kama mhusika anasaidia wengine, maneno yake huwa mazuri. Hata akisema vibaya lakini kama anasaidia, bado nampenda.” (Interview with child A on August 2025).

Literally meaning:

“If a character helps others, his words are good. Even if he says something bad, but if he helps, I still like him.” (Interview with child A in August 2025)

During FGD one Child had different view, as explained:

“Cartoons zote ni nzuri kwa sababu zimetengenezwa kwa ajili ya watoto. Sidhani kama wanaweza kuweka maneno mabaya kwa watoto.” (FGD with children on August 2025)

Literally meaning:

“All cartoons are good because they are made for children. I don't think they can put bad words for children.” (FGD with children in August 2025)

These quotes reveal two contrasting views: emerging critical thinking in older children and uncritical acceptance in younger ones. Similar findings were reported by Wijethilaka (2020) in Sri Lanka, where children linked good language with good deeds, and Von Sikorski et al. (2023) noted that children often assume children's media is automatically safe. CDA warns that such assumptions can obscure hidden stereotypes or harmful ideologies (Fairclough, 2001). This indicates the need for adult

guidance to help children question and evaluate what they watch.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

This paper concludes that children in Dodoma City perceive the language used in animated cartoons through multiple lenses shaped by their cultural familiarity, emotional engagement, peer interactions, and developing moral reasoning. They tended to value Kiswahili and culturally relevant language as understandable and relatable, admired humorous or sarcastic expressions as signs of cleverness, and embraced catchy slang as socially appealing, while younger children relied on non-verbal cues such as gestures and facial expressions to interpret meaning. Older children increasingly judged language through the moral behavior of characters, though some assumed all cartoon language is good simply because it is designed for children. These findings, interpreted through Social Learning Theory and Critical Discourse Analysis, show that while some children demonstrate emerging critical thinking, many lack the evaluative skills to filter potentially harmful or ideologically biased content. This underscores the need for intentional parental, educational, and policy interventions to promote children's media literacy, enabling them to critically engage with cartoon language and adopt positive linguistic and cultural values while resisting negative stereotypes and inappropriate communication patterns.

5.2 Recommendations

1. Parents and guardians should watch and discuss cartoons with children, helping them interpret sarcasm, slang, and moral messages in age-appropriate ways. Set media-use boundaries, prioritizing educational cartoons with positive and culturally relevant language and limiting exposure to inappropriate content.
2. Teachers and Schools should integrate media literacy into life skills and language subjects so children learn to critically evaluate cartoon language and messages. Incorporate local educational cartoons like *Ubongo Kids* in lessons to model positive language and reinforce Tanzanian cultural values.
3. Policy Makers and Regulators (TCRA, Ministry of Education) should support and fund local cartoon production to increase availability of culturally grounded and linguistically appropriate content. Establish child media content rating

guidelines to protect children from cartoons containing harmful language or stereotypes.

4. Researchers should conduct longitudinal studies to explore how prolonged exposure to cartoon language influences children's communication styles, values, and identity formation over time.

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