A MULTIMODAL APPROACH TO GENDER CONSTRUCTION IN CHILDREN'S STORIES: A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Femininity (and masculinity) patterns are learnt from childhood. The role of education, mass media, games and family environment are crucial in determining the child's future conception of gender. Within this framework, the stories that children read (or are read to by their parents) also help them form their concept of what boys and girls are like and how they are expected to act. In these tales, ideology is not only linguistically encoded but also by visual means, which makes a multimodal approach to these texts a welcome analytical tool. The present paper is aimed at analysing two editions of the same fairy tales within a time span of twenty years from a multimodal perspective. The analysis will show that there has been a significant (and positive) change in gender construction regarding female characters, even if the traditional plot remains unaltered.

KEY WORDS: gender construction, children stories, multimodality.

RESUMEN

Los modelos de femineidad y masculinidad se aprenden en la infancia. El papel de la educación, los medios de comunicación, los juegos y el ambiente familiar es crucial a la hora de determinar su futura concepción del género. En este entorno, los cuentos que leen (o que escuchan de sus padres) también contribuyen a formar su concepto de cómo son los niños y las niñas y cómo se espera que actúen. En estos cuentos, la ideología se codifica no sólo lingüísticamente sino también por medios visuales, que convierte la perspectiva de la multimodalidad en una bienvenida herramienta en el análisis de estos textos. El presente artículo tiene como objetivo analizar dos ediciones de los mismos cuentos en un periodo de veinte años desde una perspectiva multimodal. El análisis muestra que ha habido un significativo (a la par que positivo) cambio en la construcción del género respecto a los personajes femeninos, incluso si el argumento tradicional sigue siendo el mismo.

PALABRAS CLAVE: construcción de género, cuentos de niños, multimodalidad.

INTRODUCTION

When we are children, the images that surround us help us construct reality in one way or another. What children see on television, at home, at school, in the street powerfully contribute to their interpretation and construction of reality and of gender. Images are especially relevant in children's stories since by the time children approach these stories they are not necessarily still competent readers. Nevertheless, they can build up their own version of the story (and the roles the characters play) by interpreting the images they encounter. When parents read these tales for them, this construction of the story is further reinforced (sometimes altered) by the linguistic input they receive. As is well known, however, images and language do not reflect a universal reality but a culturally determined one loaded with ideological assumptions that children progressively acquire. Children stories have thus a powerful role in the construction of their reality and in the establishment and perpetuation of gender ideologies. These ideological assumptions can determine their view of others and of themselves, and help reinforce gender stereotypes that might not be necessarily true.

This paper is aimed at analysing two traditional fairy tales (*Snow White* and *Cinderella*) from a multimodal approach. From this perspective, messages are not simply encoded by linguistic means but also by visual ones, both the linguistic and visual being interrelated codes. Both codes will help children to construct a particular approach to reality and to the identification both of themselves and of others as members of a particular gender group.

More specifically, the current study focuses on the way the two main female characters are depicted both through language and image by analysing the type of transitivity processes associated with and/or realised by these characters as described by M.A.K. Halliday[1] and further adapted to the study of images by Kress and Van Leeuwen[2].

On the other hand, the analysis is diachronic since it intends to analyse the different changes in gender construction over a twenty-year span of time. The fact that both fairy tales are traditional makes it more difficult for later writers and graphic designers to express ideological changes than in the case of brand-new tales where new roles can be created for the different genders. However, far from being a disadvantage, this makes the present study more interesting since the ideological changes regarding gender will be more subtle but nevertheless existent and adapted to the new ideology of greater equality between both sexes, as shown by results.

As already mentioned, the present paper analyses two Spanish translations of Disney's traditional fairy tales (*Cinderella* and *Snow White*). Each tale has two

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[1] M.A.K. Halliday, *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. London, Arnold, 2004.
[2] G. Kress & T. Van Leeuwen, *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. London, Routledge, 2006.

versions published in two different editions, one in 1985[3] and the other in 2005. It would have been highly desirable to be able to include a more extensive corpus, which has not been possible given the unavailability of the earliest editions. This explains why the corpus is reduced to these two particular examples. However, the presence of common features in both tales accounts for the fact that it is not an individual tendency.

The paper has been divided into four main sections: the first section will briefly overview the main theoretical issues regarding Halliday's concept of transitivity and Kress and Van Leeuwen's multimodal version of systemic grammar as applied to images. The second section will analyse the data quantitatively, focusing on the linguistic and visual narrative processes associated with the two main female characters. Thirdly, the quantitative results will be contrasted in the old and modern versions in order to observe any possible changes in the representation of the main female characters. Finally, the study will conclude with some reflections about the observed ideological changes and their influence on children's construction of gender and identity.

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In his *Introduction to Functional Grammar*, Halliday describes verbs in terms of processes and he distinguishes the following types:

(a) Material processes or processes of «doing»
(b) Mental processes, which can be further classified as:
    a. Pocesses of perception (such as «to see»)
    b. Processes of feeling (such as «to feel»)
    c. Processes of cognition (such as «to think»)
(c) Verbal processes or processes of «saying»
(d) Behavioural processes or processes of «behaving»
(e) Relational processes or processes of «being»
(f) Existential processes or processes of «existing»

This classification is well established among functional linguists[4] and it is undoubtedly useful when studying the way gender ideologies are constructed and perpetuated. In other words, processes are linked to participants and depending on the type of process we choose when talking or writing, the participants involved will be presented under one light or another. On many occasions, this is done un-

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[3] The editions used for the present study are *Cenicienta* y *Blancanieves*. Madrid, Walt Disney Productions, 1985 and *Cenicienta* y *Blancanieves*. Madrid, Everest, 2000.
[4] See also A. Downing & P. Locke, *English Grammar: A University Course*. London and New York, Routledge, 2006.

consciously by the communicators but on others, it can be a conscious manipulation of language which reinforces our ideas or biases our interlocutors towards taking a particular stance.

However, inclusion of real examples in one category or another is occasionally hindered by the fact that some processes can easily be analysed as overlapping in two different categories. This is especially evident in those cases such as the following example «I don't see your point» where language is being used metaphorically and the metaphor «seeing is understanding» turns a prototypical process of perception into a process of cognition[5]. Other processes, as already mentioned, overlap in two categories such as for example «he did him a favour», which could be analysed as a material process but also as a process of feeling since it probably entails the «actor's» positive feeling towards the favoured person.

Despite these drawbacks, Halliday's classification is a powerful and undeniable tool in the analysis of ideologies and will be used as such in the present study.

As for the analysis of images, the theoretical tools employed in the present paper will be those developed by Van Leeuwen and Kress in their *Grammar of Visual Design* (see note 2). In the author's view, one of the most impressive attempts in Kress and Van Leeuwen's study is the development of real tools that can be systematically and successfully applied to the analysis of images. In other words, their analytical tools are not based merely on intuition but on a solid theoretical basis. The current paper focuses on their classification of narrative processes, very close to Halliday's own taxonomy of transitivity processes. Far from excluding each other, both approaches are complementary and lead to interesting and significant results regarding the changes taking place in the representation of female characters over the years.

Kress and Van Leeuwen distinguish the following narrative processes:

(a) Action processes: which would roughly correspond to Halliday's material processes where the main represented participant becomes the *actor* from whom the *vector*[6] emanates. As in the case of material processes, actions can be transactional when there are two participants involved; in other words, one of the participants becomes the *goal*, or non-transactional if there is only one participant involved.

(b) Reaction processes: which involve a *reacter* or main participant whose eyeline points at another participant who becomes the *phenomenon*, in which case it is defined as a *transactional reaction*. If the reacter is not looking at any other participant, the reaction is described as *non-transactional*.

(c) Verbal processes: which involve a *sayer* and an *utterance* connected by a dialogue balloon.

[5] G. LAKOFF & M. JOHNSON, *Metaphors We Live by*. Chicago and London, The University of Chigaco Press, 2003.

[6] A vector is the depicted element that «forms an oblique line [...]. The vectors may be formed by bodies or limbs or tools in action». (KRESS & VAN LEEUWEN, *op. cit.*, p. 59)

(d) Mental processes: are exactly the same as verbal processes but in this case the *senser* and *phenomenon* are connected by a thought bubble, which shows they are thinking about something but not verbalising their thoughts.

As in the case of Halliday's classification, Kress and Van Leeuwen's also poses three main problems. On the one hand, there are images in the fairy tales analysed in the present paper where the two represented participants are looking at each other. In cases like these, who is the *reacter* and who is the *phenomenon*? It could be undoubtedly argued that both participants are performing the two roles simultaneously. In my view, these kind of processes should be better described as *bi-directional reactions* in analogy with *bi-directional actions*[7]. On the other hand, there are some images where the depicted participants are clearly talking. However, they are not accompanied by a vector and a dialogue balloon, which is taken for granted. I have considered these cases as examples of verbal processes. Finally, given the richness of images, it is frequent for them to show different processes simultaneously and therefore, the main participant is seen as playing different roles, *e.g.* reacter and actor simultaneously. These cases have been analysed as two different processes albeit appearing in the same image.

2. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF DATA

2.1. TEXTUAL PROCESSES
2.1.1. *Snow White* (1985 edition) vs. *Snow White* (2005 edition)

As expected in a narrative, the most frequent textual processes in the 1985 edition are material processes which present the main character as an actor realising either actions controlled by the actor herself such as: «bite», «went upstairs», «opened», «ran», «arrived» and so on or actions not directly controlled by the action herself, namely: «started crying», «woke up», «fell down» or «fell asleep» to quote a few examples. The second most frequent type of process is the relational process which describes the main character in processes of *being* like «was», «became» and a whole variety of adjectives accompanying the verb «to be», such as «asleep», «exhausted», «scared» and so on. The third group includes verbal process with verbs such as: «asked», «exclaimed», «commented», «told», «said», among others. However, verbal processes are significantly less frequent than material processes. Much rarer are existential processes and quite remarkably, only two examples of mental processes can be found in the whole text: one of perception, «saw» and one of cognition, «realised». Significantly, readers are presented with a character who acts (with or without control of her actions) but who does not seem to think too much. This helps rein-

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[7] Bidirectional actions are those where two participants are connected by a vector.

force the stereotype of little girls as irrational creatures who act without thinking. The fact that Snow White does not speak much during the tale can also be explained by her condition as a subordinate to her stepmother but it is also a proof of her lack of power, since she does not speak even when in presence of other characters who are supposed to be her inferiors, *i.e.* the seven dwarfs.

The analysis of the most recent edition (2005) presents similarities but also important differences. As commented in the Introduction, the story is obviously the same and it must have been difficult for editors and designers to give it a more modern flavour. However, it is still possible to present the main character in quite a different light as the analysis below shows. As in the earlier edition, the most frequent processes are also *material processes*, followed by *verbal processes*. However, verbal processes in the most recent edition double the percentage of the earliest one. This has a result that the main character seems to be much more «talkative» as well as more prone to express her views and not to remain submissively silent. Likewise, although the verbal processes are apparently the same as those present in the former edition, a closer analysis reflects that whereas in the oldest edition Snow White limits herself to accept her role as cleaner of the little house, in the most recent one, she and the seven dwarfs «agree» on her assuming the household tasks.

Quite remarkable too is the fact that *mental processes* are much more common in this edition than in the previous one. On the other hand, there is a perfect balance between *perception processes* like «looked», «listened», «discovered and *feeling processes* such as «bore» or «consoled». Thus, readers of this newest edition face a new Snow White who acts less but thinks more as opposed to the one in the former edition. Finally, both *relational* and *existential processes* coexist in a perfect balance of three cases each. The following graphic sums up and compares the results of both analyses:
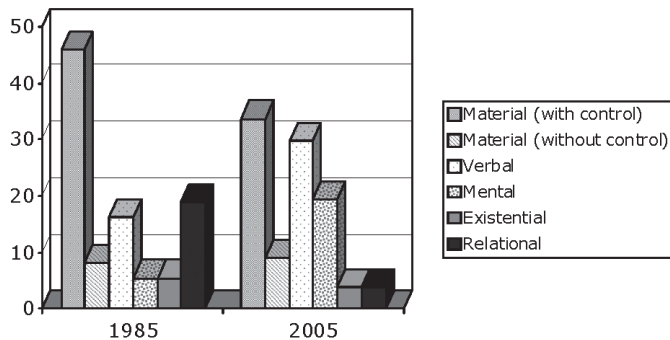

Graphic 1. Transitivity Processes in *Snow White* (edition 1985 *vs.* 2005).

3.1.2. *Cinderella* (edition of 1985) vs. *Cinderella* (edition of 2005)

As in the case of *Snow White*, the predominant processes in both editions are material *processes* —especially with control by the actor as opposed to material processes where the actor does not control the action, *e.g.* «cried» or «woke up».

Although it is a slightly less dramatic decrease, material processes without control are slightly less frequent in the most recent edition, showing a character who is more in control of her actions. The second most frequent type of process are *verbal processes*, which were already quite frequent in the other edition but nevertheless increase in the most recent edition, as it has also been observed in the modern edition of *Snow White*. As already commented, this general increase in verbal processes is very significant since silence is usually connected with powerlessness and submission. Thus, female characters who speak up more frequently are also regarded by readers as having more power.

Regarding *mental processes*, it can be observed an increase in the use of this type of processes in the most recent edition as opposed to the older one. A deeper analysis reflects that whereas the 1985 edition favours *perception processes*, *e.g.* «saw» or «heard»; the 2005 edition also includes cognition processes, *e.g.* «thought» or «realised». As shown by the following graphic, there is a clear balance between *mental and relational processes*. In other words, the main female character is not simply presented as merely «being» but as a «thinking» being.
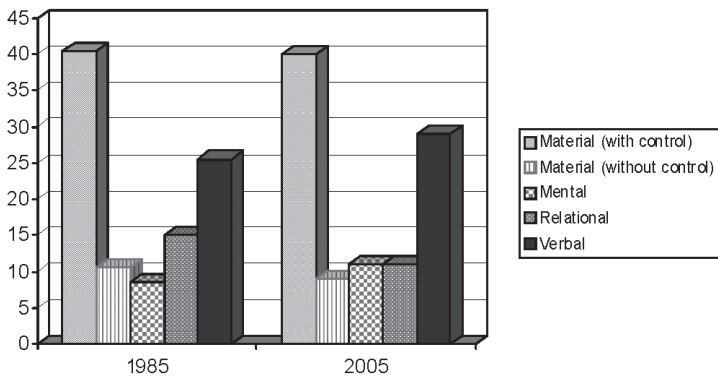
Graphic 2.

3.2. Visual narrative processes
3.2.1. *Snow White* (1985 edition) vs. *Snow White* (2005 edition)

In the 1985 edition of the tale, there are as many as 29 images where readers can see the main character depicted. The way she is represented helps construct her character and her role as a young female human being. Readers —specially if they are younger children who still cannot master reading skills and mainly focus on the visual input while their parents read them the text— will construct their whole view of the character based on the way she is depicted and the things she is seen doing. Images, therefore, become as powerful as the text —sometimes even more— in the construction or perpetuation of ideologies regarding gender, among other issues. As already seen with textual processes, the most frequent visual processes in a narrative are also *material processes*, where the main character can be represented either as an *actor* from which the main vector emanates or as a *goal* —*i.e.* an actor is doing

something to the *goal*. The main character can also be drawn as looking at another participant —*i.e.* the *phenomenon*, in which case she adopts the role of *reacter*, from which the main vector emanates. On the contrary, she can be looked at by someone else, adopting then the role of *phenomenon*. Finally, there are cases where she is depicted simultaneously as *reacter* and *phenomenon*, *i.e.* this happens when the female and male character are depicted looking at each other.

The graphic below sumps up the results found in both editions. Significant differences are further explained in the following paragraphs.
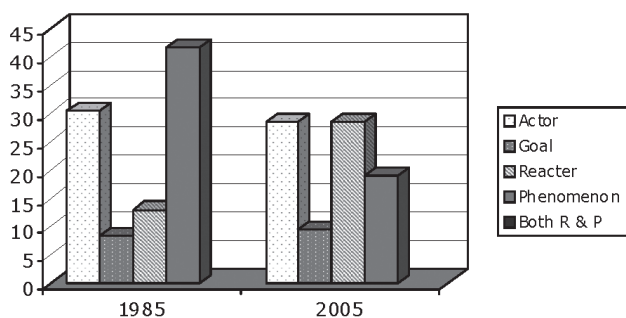
Graphic 3. Visual roles adopted by Snow White in both editions.

As can be observed in Graphic 3, the main character appears as an *actor* in many of the images where she is depicted. However, the analysis of the data reflects that in the 1985 edition the most common representation is that of *phenomenon*. In other words, the main character is mainly presented as an object for contemplation by other characters. As a result, children reading this tale also adopt the role of reacters, aligning themselves with the other characters but not with the main female character, who is «passivised».

As opposed to that, in the most recent edition the number of images where Snow White is depicted as *phenomenon* is drastically reduced. In fact, this edition prefers presenting her as more active, either as an *actor* or a *reacter*. The number of images where she is depicted as *reacter* doubles that of the earliest edition. Another significant difference that can also be observed is the increase of images where there is a balance between *reacter* and *phenomenon*. In other words, when the 2005 Snow White is looked at she also gazes back, which can be interpreted as an increase of her power. This dramatic difference is clearly reflected in the images of the happy ending, where Snow White and the Prince are represented together. Thus, the 1985 edition reflects a prince who is the clear actor of the image, *i.e.* all the vectors emanate from him and we can hardly see Snow White, who is practically reduced to a little head hidden in the Prince's arms, who is holding her. As opposed to that, the more modern edition shows both characters looking at each other, even at the same eye level, which shows a more balanced power between both of them. Images 1 and 2 below illustrate this significant difference.

Finally, there is a slight increase in the role of *goal* in the more modern edition, which is somehow surprising since the character on the whole is depicted as

Image 1. Snow White's happy ending (1985).

Image 2. Snow White's happy ending (2005).

being more active. However, a closer analysis reveals that whereas in the 1985 edition Snow White becomes *goal* the first time the Prince appears and her role is drastically diminished, in the most recent edition this is not restricted to the appearance of the main male character.

As it is well known, one of the central images in the tale is the moment when the Prince kisses Snow White back to life. Significantly, even though she is obviously depicted as the *goal* in both editions, the former edition totally minimizes her role and she is hardly seen because the Prince's head covers her face. The whole image is presented in an oblique angle which maximises the figure of the Prince while Snow White remains in the background. As readers, we can only see her partially and take for granted she is there. On the contrary, the new edition focuses on both characters and the image is presented frontally. As a result, readers can perfectly see the profile of both characters and the representation is quite balanced, that is, it does not focus on one character but on both of them. Images 3 and 4 below illustrate this difference.


Image 3. SnowWhite (1985).

Image 4. Snow White (2005).

3.2.2. Visual roles in *Cinderella* (editions 1985 vs. 2005)

As expected, the predominant visual role is again that of *actor* in both editions, *i.e.* most images show Cinderella performing actions. There are not important changes regarding the role of *goal*, which is quite balanced in both editions. However, the most significant change is the dramatic increase in the number of images where Cinderella is depicted as reacter in the more recent edition, which more than doubles the 1985 edition. In other words, as happened with Snow White, the modern editions prefer depicting the female characters as more active and not only as objects to be looked at. This important change is summed up by graphic 4.
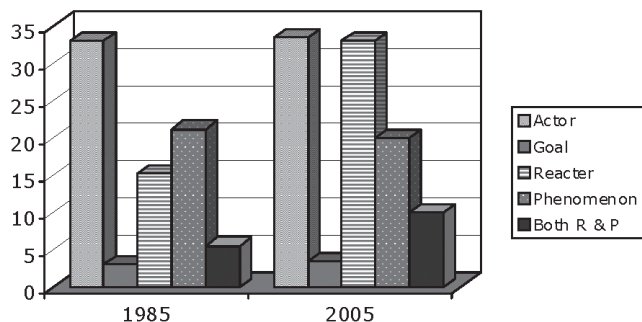
Graphic 4. Visual roles in *Cinderella* (1985 *versus* 2005).

A closer look at the images also reflects important changes in the relationship between the main female and male characters. As in Snow White's kissing scene, one of the central scenes in Cinderella is when she and the Prince meet for the first time the night of the ball. This first meeting is remarkably different in both editions. Thus, we can distinguish three main differences in the two images below:
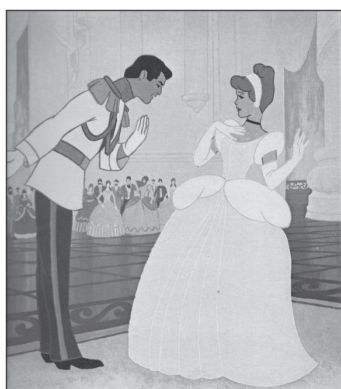

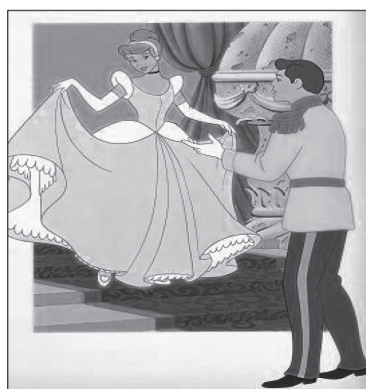Image 5. Cinderella and the Prince's first meeting (1985).

Image 6. Cinderella and the Prince's first meeting (2005).

(i) The edition of 1985 places the Prince on the left as the *given information* while Cinderella occupies the right position as *new information*. In other words, she is a new element in the Prince's life, the Prince becoming the central element. On the other hand, the edition of 2005 places Cinderella on the left, that is, she is the main character whereas the Prince appears as a new element in her life. As a result, readers focus on Cinderella as the main character here.

(ii) In the 1985 edition, the Prince is also the main actor from whom the vector emanates while Cinderella is merely surprised at such attention. On the contrary, the 2005 edition presents Cinderella both as *actor*, *i.e.* she is walking into the room, and as *reacter*, *i.e.* she is looking at the Prince, who is surprised by her entrance.

(iii) Finally, there is also an important difference concerning the angle both characters adopt, especially with regard to eye-level. In other words, whereas in the 1985 edition, Cinderella occupies a slightly lower position with respect to the Prince, who has to bend down to be at her same eye-level, the 2005 edition positions Cinderella in a higher position (she is depicted at the top of the stairs) with respect to the Prince, who is also minimised by being less salient —the colour of his jacket almost gets mixed with the colour of the background.

Image 7. Cinderella's happy ending (1985).

Image 8. Cinderella's happy ending (2005).

Likewise, another central image of the story is *Cinderella*'s happy ending, where the male character is minimised in the more recent edition whereas he was the main actor from which the vectors emanated in the earlier edition. Thus, in the 1985 edition, both characters appear hand in hand going downstairs after their wedding ceremony but it is the Prince who leads the way, stepping forward and pointing with his right hand while Cinderella looks at him. In the 2005 edition, the readers can see both characters in a carriage, but it is Cinderella who occupies the central position looking at the readers and waving while the Prince is sitting next to

her so we can just see his profile. As for the characters' *thematic position*[8] (see paragraph above), we can observe that the Prince is placed on the left as the given information, making Cinderella the «new» element in his life. In the 2005 edition, on the other hand, the Prince is placed on Cinderella's right, turning him into the new element in her life.

CONCLUSIONS

Children are highly influenced by the way their favourite characters are depicted and how they act. This leads young readers to construct a view of gender which can be ideologically manipulated both by writers and illustrators. The present analysis has shown that despite being traditional fairy tales, there is a clear attempt to present the main female characters as more active and able of more involvement. Male princes are not the only actors but female princesses act, think and speak significantly more in the present editions than in the previous ones, where they were presented as passive, less talkative and reactive.

More concretely, the comparison of both tales shows that, as far as textual differences are concerned, there is an increase in verbal processes in the 2005 editions, which reflects more powerful characters who do not stay submissively silent. The use of mental processes also rises, including not only processes of perception but also processes of feeling and cognition. In other words, the main female characters «thinks more» than in the 1985 editions. As for visual differences, there are mainly three, namely:

  (i) Drastic decrease in the female characters' passive role of *phenomenon.*
 (ii) Significant increase in their more active role of *reacters.*
(iii) Significant increase in the simultaneous role of *reacter* & *phenomenon*, which shows a balance of power between the female and the male characters.

Therefore, it can be concluded that there has been a favourable development towards the construction of female characters in the recent editions.

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[8] With this term we refer to the oposition *theme-rheme* or *given* versus *new* information represented visually in our Western culture by the direction from left to right.