

The popular comedy *Legally Blonde* not only elicits a few laughs, but also offers a portrayal of discrete — though potent — language stereotypes. In this case, it's not a matter of communicative issues, but actually of profiling based solely on stylistic qualities. As we take a deeper look at protagonist Elle Woods' language, a larger picture of language ideology's prevalence in our society emerges. While the overall theme of *Legally Blonde* may have something of a feminist bent (Hermes, 2009), in fact the movie does more to reinforce gender stereotypes than to dismantle them. The film tries to subvert such stereotypes, but fails by portraying its heroine not as the rule itself, but as the exception. While Elle herself may begin to dismantle stereotypes, — by asserting herself as more substantive than she may appear upon first inspection — the other characters in the film perpetuate and reinforce their respective stereotypes. In this analysis, I will deconstruct how linguistic discrimination plays a part in the 2001 comedy, *Legally Blonde*, and in our larger society as a whole.

In *Legally Blonde*, the main character Elle Woods appears to have it all: the looks, the money, the beau. That is, until Warner — Elle's "perfect" boyfriend — decides that she isn't serious enough for him and dumps her before leaving for Harvard Law School. Elle, devastated, decides that to win Warner back, she'll have to become a

serious law student, and attend Harvard with him. Once there, Elle discovers that not only is Warner engaged to another woman, — who's much more serious (or at least speaks Standard American English much more than Elle) — but that she'll "never be good enough" for him (*Legally Blonde*, 2001). So, she works hard and astonishes everyone by winning her professor's legal case. Along the way, Elle breaks down the stereotypical facade, but she leaves us wondering: is she the rule, or just the exception? Does Elle's character break down stereotypes by imploring us to search below the surface of a person, or does her character portray smart "valley girls" as a rarity, as opposed to a norm?

Linguistic preferences color the way we view others, and construct within us an ideology around language that informs our perceptions of others. Many of our own language ideologies are informed heavily by Standard Language Ideology. Standard Language Ideology (SLI) is defined by Lippi-Green as, "a bias toward an abstracted, idealized, homogenous spoken language which is imposed and maintained by dominant bloc institutions and which names as its model the written language, but which is drawn primarily from the spoken language of the upper middle class." (67) Subconsciously, many of us treat an individual's language usage as a means of gauging who they are and how they must be in the world.

In *Legally Blonde*, Elle Woods strives to overcome the perceptions she has of herself, and the perceptions that others have of her. Elle frequently comes off as ditzy; in the film one of her greatest desires is to be perceived as "serious" enough for Warner, her ex-boyfriend. When Elle follows Warner to Harvard, she's consistently alienated and bullied by her peers for her "valley girl" tendencies, until she proves herself by

winning her professor's case in court — much to everyone's surprise. With bouncy blonde hair, an affinity for pink, and a chihuahua in her purse at all times, Elle is an expression of the stereotypical valley girl. She's naive and buoyant in her mannerisms, executing every act with an almost-annoying enthusiasm. She employs filler words constantly, "like" and "um" invading her sentences, and relies on "uptake" (defined by Ritchart & Arvaniti as "... [r]ising pitch movements at the end of statements") in her speech in order to "hold the floor" (Ritchart & Arvaniti, 2014). Such lexical and phonological tendencies are common in Southern California speech, especially in females who hail from SoCal (Ritchart & Arvaniti, 2014). By speaking and dressing in a way that fulfills preconceived notions of what a valley girl "should" be, Elle reinforces negative stereotypes, even as she seeks to break them down.

While Elle nearly manages to distinguish herself from the perpetuated and negative stereotype of the wealthy, unintelligent valley girl, many of the supporting characters in the film fall reinforce them. In a scene in the beginning of the movie, a store manager tries to take advantage of Elle because of her marked English. The manager speaks Standard American English (SAE) in this scene, while Elle speaks "valley girl," and not SAE. The woman whispers to her coworker, "there's nothing I love more than a dumb blonde with daddy's plastic" (*Legally Blonde*, 2001). While Elle manages to "win" when the store manager tries to con her and Elle does not give in, she still manages to perpetuate the underlying stereotypes this scene reinforces. The perceptions placed upon Elle are neither positive, nor correct; but instead of making us do a double take when we notice assumptions arise, Elle plays to the exception, and not

the rule itself by creating herself as an anomaly, whilst her friends and supporting characters continue playing to their own respective stereotypes.

When Elle makes it to Harvard, (much to the disbelief of her college advisor¹) she is often alienated by her peers, who see her as vapid and lacking intellectually. In one scene in which Warner and Vivienne (Elle's ex-boyfriend and his fiancé, respectively) won't let Elle join their study group, a classmate who speaks SAE makes a comment to Elle as she's leaving, intentionally making her voice nasally: "maybe there's, like, a sorority you could, like, join instead, like?" (*Legally Blonde*, 2001). Elle's reaction is one of hurt and defeat, as she sulks back to her room after her peers again bully her. In this intentionally nasty line, we can see that preconceptions of who and what a girl from LA must act and be like have completely informed how Elle's peer is able to see her. Such a bias makes the classmate unable to distinguish the person Elle actually is from the stereotype that's been fed to her. Such ostracism and assumptions emphasize how often stylistic emphasis in language overrules its communicative duties, and how we often make false assumptions and unkind judgements simply based upon our own linguistic preferences.

Elle may manage to subvert some prejudice by proving her intelligence in front of her peers and professors at Harvard, — she studies hard, answers questions correctly in class, and attains a coveted internship spot — but the unfortunate stereotypes she tries so hard to break through are perpetuated by other characters in the movie. As *Legally Blonde*, and many movies like it, are accepted into mainstream culture, "classic"

¹ Advisor: (flummoxed) Harvard Law School?... What're your backups?
Elle: I don't need backups. I'm going to Harvard.
(He decides to humor her).

roles — the butt-of-the-joke best friend, the one-off hero, etc. — are recycled many times over. For example, one of Elle's best friends (Margot) is represented in most scenes as the dumb sidekick; she speaks with a very marked "valley girl" accent. Margot routinely makes oblivious comments in a too-nasally, and even-more-marked voice and acts as the butt of the joke², and this stereotype does not begin nor end with her. As Lippi-Green makes clear in her book, one of the quickest and most effective ways our stereotypes are reinforced is through media (p. 101). Again and again we're inundated with the "dumb sidekick" who happens to have a marked accent, further belittling and condescending people who speak in such marked English (see Donkey from *Shrek*, Mushu from *Mulan*, Pumba from *The Lion King*, etc.). Such constant reminders of designated social roles are excellent at perpetuating these negative stereotypes.

As Angela Devas (2006) writes, "Legally Blonde is set within the nexus of film as social text and social practice..." What Devas implies (and Lippi-Green would attest to) is that as this movie reaches a wide audience, so too do the linguistic stereotypes embedded within it. *Legally Blonde* offers us an excellent example of linguistic discrimination in media, but it's hardly the only case. Media — movies in particular — plays a large role in our lives, as the average child between the ages of 2 and 11 spends more than 24 hours a week watching television (Hinckley, 2014). Lippi-Green acknowledges this reliance on media as information when she writes, "... standard language ideology is introduced by the schools, vigorously promoted by the media and

² Margot: Here, you're gonna need this.

Elle: Your scrunchie?

Margot: My lucky scrunchie. It helped me pass Spanish.

Serena: You passed Spanish because you gave Professor Montoya a lap dance after the final.

Margot: Yeah...luckily!

entertainment industries and further institutionalized by the corporate sector” (73). As we see SLI present in our favorite movies and tv shows, we’re taught to internalize the expectations and prejudices that go along with certain accents and ways of speaking; such ideals can negatively impact our ability to see people as they are, rather than as we think they must be. In *Legally Blonde*, the brilliant Elle Woods is portrayed as the exception, and not the rule. Even as it seeks to reject it, this movie reinforces the negative stereotypical “valley girl” and does not allow for the dismantling of discrimination through means of language.

Works Cited

Devas, A. (2006). Class in the classroom: Media students, pedagogy and legally blonde. *Media International Australia, Incorporating Culture & Policy*, 120(120), 168-180.

D'Onofrio, A. (2015). Persona-based information shapes linguistic perception: Valley Girls and California vowels. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 19(2), 241-256.

Hermes, J. (2009). Review article: Legally blonde: Developing a research domain at the intersection of law and popular culture: Steve greenfield and guy osborn (eds), readings in law and popular culture. london and new york: Routledge, 2006. £95.00. 328 pp.orit kamir, framed: Women in law and film. durham, NC and london: Duke university press, 2006. US\$23.95. 324 pp. richard K. sherwin (ed.), popular culture and law. aldershot: Ashgate, 2006. £125.00. 612 pp. *European Journal of Communication*, 24(2), 219-230.

Hinckley, David. "Average American Watches 5 Hours of TV per Day." *NY Daily News*. NYDailyNews.com, 05 Mar. 2014. Web. 19 Oct. 2016.

Legally Blonde. Dir. Robert Luketic. Perf. Reese Witherspoon. MGM Home Entertainment, 2001. Netflix.

Lippi-Green, Rosina. English with an Accent: Language, Ideology, and Discrimination in the United States. London: Routledge, 1997. Print.

Ritchart, A., & Arvaniti, A. (2014, May). The form and use of uptalk in Southern Californian English. In *Proceedings of Speech Prosody* (Vol. 7, pp. 20-23).

I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment.