

Linguistic Convergence: Insights From Tina Fey's *Mean Girls*

Name:

Institution:

### Linguistic Convergence in Tina Fey's *Mean Girls*

Linguistic convergence refers to a contact-induced change in language whereby languages depicting several bilingual speakers tend to borrow syntactic and morphological features on a mutual basis. By borrowing such forms of language devices, literary works exhibit similar typologies (Ningrum, 2009). In *Mean Girls*, Cady Heron arrives in the US, coming from an African bush country in which her zoologist parents raised her. In order to adapt to the system of North Shore High, Cady realizes that she needs to learn and use vocabularies that other in-group "Plastics" use. Initial conversations with the popular girls see Regina, the girls' leader, tell Cady to "Shut Up!" As Cady is not familiar with such a slang language, she responds, "I didn't say anything". However, the latter moments see Cady speak Plastic in a fluent manner and tosses words such as "word vomit" to mean babbling and "fetch" to mean cool. Initially, Cady would not comprehend the slang language as a practical example is where Regina tells her "Shut Up" to mean "Really?" or "No Way" but Cady's response does not depict any correlation. Through Cady, Tina Fey depicts the manner in which linguistic convergence is so deep-rooted that even Cady, a girl who hails from a bush family, adapts so quickly and speaks Plastic with fluency. The notable aspect is that linguistic convergence is shaped by the domineering culture. This affirmation is evident in a case where Cady, a near-lone stranger, could not influence the popular culture in the US. Rather, the popular culture of using slang language in the US influenced her mode of speech to a significant extent. Besides portraying linguistic convergence as an in-depth element characterized by substantial influences of dominant cultures, Tina affirms with Baker and Kirsten (2001) in demonstrating the role played by consistent practice in shaping one's behavior and values. For instance, the movie's climax sees Cady make critical decisions about herself and her friends. The notable decision comes at a point when she decides not to act like

“mean girls” but embrace dynamism. Indeed, linguistic convergence stretches beyond the extent of portray the influence of popular cultures and spearheads Tina’s theme in which the Mean Girls symbolizes rigidity among popular cultures; rather than exhibit flexibility as depicted in Cady.

Linguistic convergence is seen further when Cady’s identity begins to change and conform to the norms of the Plastic clique. After some time, she adopts a similar language as that of the Plastics to portray affiliation with the group and, exercise power over groups. This form of transformation depicts the fact that communicators exhibit attraction to other individuals with similar styles of speech as theirs. In addition, Cady’s transformation indicates that communicators seek to adapt to the dominant culture’s speech in various approaches, including the manner in which vocabulary is chosen. Furthermore, Tina uses Cady’s character to illustrate that the need for approval is preceded by speech adaptation in a quest to accommodate other groups’ styles, speaking in a manner that would promote societal fit. Such a form of change is seen when Cady starts using terms such as “shut up”, rather than stick to her daily language. The adaptation can be inferred as a form of communicators to sound like other in-group members and, in the end, become affiliated with the group (such as Cady’s adaptation and affiliation with the Plastics).

Linguistic convergence is seen further when private symbol worlds overlap, come more closely together and incline toward each other. Through linguistic convergence, group cohesiveness and consciousness results. Characters in the literary work fantasize together by sharing beliefs, interests and thinking the same things. In turn, linguistic convergence is seen to draw characters together. In *Mean Girls*, a clique of girls depict similar and close individuals.

The girls discuss similar topics in which they bond by making fun of others. On one hand, a negative environment is created when the girls say similar and negative things about their weight, failing to reassure each other. While conversing with Damian, Janis says,

See? That's the thing with you plastics. You think everybody is in love with you when actually, everybody HATES you! Like, Aaron Samuels, for example, he broke up with Regina and guess what? He still doesn't want you! So why are you still messing with Regina, Cady? I'll tell you why, because you are a mean girl! You're a bitch! Here. You can have this. It won a prize (Fey, 2004).

In this scenario, Janis uses the word “bitch” as part of a normal conversation yet she initially understood it as an offensive term. The indication is that linguistic convergence plays a role so significant that vivid transformation results in characters such as Janis. As she speaks, she does not seem to pay much attention to the offensive nature of the term “bitch” and her association of the word with the Plastics. Indeed, linguistic convergence accounts for the significant transformation that characters such as Janis undergo in a quest to adapt to the prevailing and dominant culture. Tina uses such characters and terms in the characters to reveal the correlation between culture cohesiveness and the role of linguistic convergence. In concurrence with affirmations by Retmono (2003), the convergence is not only seen on the surface view of alterations in speech but also plays a critical role of enabling the characters fit in the society.

In another incident, Janis says to Damian, “And evil takes a human form in Regina George. Don't be fooled because she may seem like your typical selfish, back-stabbing slut faced ho-bag, but in reality, she's so much more than that” (Fey, 2004). In this case, consistency is seen

as an attribute that defines language convergence. In particular, Janis seems to master the dominant language to such a significant extent that she fluently speaks the same. Tina uses the character to demonstrate the manner in which cultural erosion arises from language convergence. Specifically, Janis depicts the manner in which a dominant culture (such as a language) alters the minority's cultural operations as the latter group seeks to adapt in accordance with the preference and prevailing conditions within the dominant culture. In *Mean Girls*, the Plastics are seen to carry the day and remain domineering, determined to influence other characters (such as Candy) in a quest to spearhead their forms of behavior and language.

Linguistic convergence depicts a transformed character in Cady when she says, "Regina said she'll talk to Aaron. And now she is. How can Janis hate her? She's such a good... SLUT!" (Fey, 2004). Whereas the bush country in which she was brought does not seem to exhibit familiarity and frequency of usage in terms such as "slut", Cady's portrayal of linguistic convergence is seen to define her speech in response to the needs of a domineering popular culture, the Plastics. The concept of linguistic convergence is evident further when Cady says, "Halloween is the one night a year when girls can dress like a total slut and no other girls can say anything about it." Through the character, Tina is determined to demonstrate that linguistic convergence operates at institutional level in such a manner that, individuals from minority cultures tend to seek "accommodation" in the dominant groups by embracing similar behaviors and speeches towards group belongingness and cohesiveness, just as Cady seeks cohesiveness by speaking in a similar manner as the Plastics. However, the notable fact is that linguistic convergence takes some time to develop. This aspect is seen when Cady's initial moments in the institution are characterized by critical influences of the bush country's forms of language (where she was brought up", and keeps guessing about the meaning of phrases. The guesswork is

seen when she responds to Regina, “I didn’t say anything”, yet Regina had meant “No Way”. Overall, linguistic convergence is depicted as an element that reduces cultural gaps between or among groups from unrelated backgrounds.

Another incident where linguistic convergence arises is a case where Tina uses the character of characters to depict the general manner in which the choice of words and underlying symbolisms depict adaptation, rather than adopt the actual words. For instance, Janis says, “Oh, I love seeing teachers outside of school. It's like seeing a dog walk on its hind legs.” (Fey, 2004). The implication of such a figurative language is that linguistic convergence stretches beyond mere words and operates in such a manner that characters tend to adjust to the dominant culture by being choosy in the statements made while striving to operate in relation to, or reflect the culture of existing majority groups.

## References

- Baker, M. and Kirsten, M. (2001). *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* . London and New York, Routledge
- Fey, T. (2004). *Mean Girls*. Wendy Greene Bricmont, Paramount Pictures
- Ningrum, N. A. (2009). *An Analysis of Slang Expressions Translation in “Mean Girls” Movie*.  
Sebelas Maret University, Surakarta
- Retmono, T. (2003). *Inaccuracies in the Translation of Film Dialogs on Indonesian TV station*.  
Surakarta: UNS Press.