"SHE'S THE GREATEST EARTHBENDER I'VE EVER SEEN!"

Female agency and representation in the animated series *Avatar: The Last Airbender*

Bachelor's Thesis

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Media ja sen sisältämät diskurssit ovat avainasemassa rakentamassa todellisuuttamme ja ymmärrystämme siitä, keitä olemme ja mihin koemme sen perusteella pystyvämme ja kuuluvamme. Sillä on erityisesti nuorten ihmisten kehitykselle ja identiteetin rakentumiselle merkittävä vaikutus. Tästä syystä on myös tärkeää kiinnittää huomiota tapoihin, joilla toimijuutta kuvataan mediassa, varsinkin vähemmän edustettujen ihmisryhmien tapauksessa.

Tämän tutkielman tavoitteena on tarkastella kielellisiä ja visuaalisia keinoja, joilla naishahmoille annetaan toimijuutta tai sitä rajoitetaan amerikkalaisessa animaatiosarjassa *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. Tutkimus myös pyrkii analysoimaan sitä, millaisia representaatioita eli kuvauksia heidän toimijuudestaan syntyy. Näitä asioita analysoitiin tutkimuksessa kahden naishahmon osalta multimodaalisen kriittisen diskurssianalyysin keinoin, joten se sisälsi laadullista analyysiä. Visuaalisista piirteistä tarkasteltiin kuvakulmia, etäisyyttä, asentoja sekä tapahtumapaikkaa, kielellisistä puolestaan kohteliaisuuteen liittyvää kielenkäyttöä ja yksittäisiä sanavalintoja.

Tutkimustuloksista ilmeni, että naishahmoille on sarjassa annettu yleisellä tasolla suhteellisen paljon toimijuutta verrattuna aikaisempiin esimerkkeihin lasten ja nuorten mediasta, ja että hahmot ovat kykeneviä saavuttamaan tavoitteitaan omalla toiminnallaan. Heidän toimijuudestaan muodostettavat representaatiot antavat molemmista hahmoista itsenäisen, itsevarman ja määrätietoisen kuvan, mikä on osittain saavutettu antamalla hahmoille maskuliinisiksi koettuja piirteitä. Naishahmojen välillä ilmeni kuitenkin myös eroja sekä siinä, millaisten elementtien merkitystä korostettiin toimijuuden rakentumisessa että siinä, miten toimijuus heidän kohdallaan näyttäytyi. Kaiken kaikkiaan tutkimus antaa osansa mediarepresentaatioiden tutkimukselle, mutta kattavampi kartoitus erityisesti identiteettien ja niiden intersektioiden merkityksestä naistoimijuudelle ja sen representaatiolle on edelleen tarpeen.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Gender is a concept that defines a large part of our understanding of the world and ourselves very early on. One of the contexts in which we first encounter gendered displays are cartoons, films and other media. From them, we form perceptions of what is considered "common" or "normal" regarding different genders, which can also be called socialisation (Waksler 1991: 3). In recent years, representation of gender in media has become an increasingly interesting issue since traditional gender norms and roles have been challenged in many ways and alternative, more complex and nuanced ways to perceive gender have been offered. Especially significant is the representation of gender in media primarily targeted towards children and adolescents. There has been a shift from depicting female characters as passive, dependent and minor to introducing female characters that are strong, opinionated and individual. It is important to study these representations, as they not only reveal inequities but also play a significant role in how children view themselves and their possibilities depending on their gender.

Along with the arrival of third-wave feminism in the early 1990's, which emphasises the meaning of intersections of gender, racial, and class identities in the feminist thinking, critical approaches towards gender portrayals have been taken (Curtis and Cardo 2018). While studies about different kinds of gender representations have increased recently, the representations of female agency specifically have not been as largely researched yet. Additional qualitative research, which also takes into account the power relations in societies, is needed in order to reveal the complexity of these concepts and consider the importance of context in the analysis.

Therefore, the present study aims to analyse the animated series *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and the ways in which female agency is represented in the show, with a focus on two characters, Toph and Azula. To do this, the methods of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MmCDA) are applied. In the first section, previous literature about the concepts closely connected to the topic is introduced: the framework of CDA and further, MmCDA with their ideas of language as social action and multimodality and the concept of representation. The concept of agency and its manifestations, as well as an overview of how female characters have previously been represented in media are also discussed in the literature review section. Secondly, the research questions are presented and the

methods and data of the present study are described. Lastly, there is a presentation of the analysis and a summary of the results.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Gender and language through Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MmCDA)

This section will begin by explaining the important connections of language and social action from the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis. Here, the central concept of representation will also be clarified. Lastly, a multimodal dimension to Critical Discourse Analysis will be explained.

2.1.1 Gender and language as social action

Since the data of this study consists partly of linguistic content in a cultural product, it is reasonable to view how language can be regarded as social action in relation to gender. Language and language use develop in social environments, yet we also produce these environments and norms through our language use (Machin and Mayr 2012: 21). Thus, language constructs our reality and according to Discourse Analysis, is inseparable from social action (Pietikäinen and Mäntynen 2019: 92). Further, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) pays attention to the power relations and inequalities hidden within our reality and the structures that our language use maintains (e.g. Blommaert 2005: 24–25, Litosseliti and Sunderland 2002: 19, Machin and Mayr 2012: 24). By critically studying cultural products, such as children's animated programs, it is possible to notice these aspects in actual social contexts. To elaborate, there are differing ways in which characters have been given qualities and opportunities and how they have been situated in relation to other characters or events.

Indeed, as the present study focuses on fictional characters, how these characters, their language use and other behaviour are depicted through the authors' choices must be considered. Ways to portray people, events, and things in order to construct a certain kind of image of them are called representations (Pietikäinen and Mäntynen 2019: 78). Representations are the products of discourses, which are ways to talk about the world from different perspectives and create meanings. At the same time, other perspectives are omitted (Pietikäinen and Mäntynen 2019: 74, 78). CDA regards representations as deeply intertwined with power: what is made visible, in which ways and in which contexts, who is allowed to represent who? (Pietikäinen and Mäntynen 2019: 74, 78). The ways in

which the female characters in the show are represented show the ways in which these power relations are viewed by the creators, how they assess them and decide to depict them.

2.1.2 Multimodality

When we also take into account the other semiotic means in the critical analysis of language as social action, we are analysing texts from the viewpoint of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MmCDA). Examples of these semiotic means are images and non-verbal communication (Machin and Mayr 2012: 17). There are different options available in visual communication and we make choices among them: how people or processes are depicted changes the representations and perceptions of these people and processes, which makes it political (Machin and Mayr 2012: 18). This makes it important to pay attention to what choices have been made in ATLA as well, and what choices could have been made instead.

Iconographical analysis in MmCDA aims to analyse individual elements in visual images, which reveal implicit discourses by showing what elements are shown to be salient and which ones are less important or excluded. According to the semiotic theory of Barthes (1973, 1977; cited in Machin and Mayr 2012: 49–50), these elements in images have denotations, which describe what or who is depicted in the image, and connotations, which reveal the ideologies and values through what is represented and how it is represented. Poses, objects, settings, distance and angle are some examples of connotators that Machin and Mayr (2012: 51, 97–100) mention. All of these aspects are usually considered in the creative process of media products in one way or another, which is why they also reflect the viewpoints of the creators and society as a whole.

2.2 Manifestations of female agency

As the ideas of MmCDA suggest, representation through multimodal semiotic means often determines the agency of the represented. Therefore, it is relevant to define the concept, features, and manifestations of agency. In this section, both the previous and current notions of agency will be described. Examples of how women's agency has shown in actual societal contexts will also be provided due to their important connections to media representations.

2.2.1 What is agency?

Agency refers to one's capacity to be an active subject who is able to accomplish things and control the main aspects of one's life, as well as to exert power over others (Hewson 2010: 13). The ways to exercise agency are connected to the specific socio-economic structures dependent on time and place (Charrad 2010: 517, Evans and Strauss 2010: 820). In agency building, people both produce and are produced by these systems and structures, which means that they shape social rules through encounters and, at the same time, adopt knowledge of these social rules (Bandura 2001: 1, Tucker 1998: 81). Lack of agency, in turn, means being controlled and acted upon or having things happen to oneself without one's own will, in other words, lacking power (Hewson 2010: 13). I will be examining the choices that the authors have made regarding the opportunities and capacity of female characters to directly influence their lives and exercise power over others, or the lack of it. Thus, the focus of this study will mostly be on individual agency (Hewson 2010: 13, Bandura 2001: 13).

The notion of human agency has been shaped during history, connecting to the cultural meanings of different time periods. From the times of ancient Greece to the Renaissance, agency was rather restricted as it included only the male adult members of society. The fairly modern definition of human agency of the Renaissance also still emphasised masculinity in the rational assertion of agency (Hewson 2010: 14). This is already a good starting point for studying how female agency is shown in a modern cultural product. Giddens is one of the most notable contemporary authors studying agency, and he considers it to be one's potential to "'make a difference' to a pre-existing state of affairs or course of events [in other words], to exercise some sort of power" (Giddens 1984: 14). Thus power, which is exercised through the use of resources, is a central element of agency according to Giddens.

2.2.2 Female agency in the real world

Regarding manifestations of female agency in the real world, then, is important as they are linked to society's prevailing views on how much choice, power, and opportunities women have or should have. The ways in which media depict women's agency have a crucial role in creating and reinforcing said perceptions – and realities. Charrad (2010: 518) discusses the role of national state and gender policies in historically shaping women's rights in nearly all areas of life including politics, economics, citizenship, sexuality and reproduction. According to Evans and Strauss' (2010: 820–821) study on gender-based agency in China, women's agency especially in more rural areas is characterised by traditions and can be achieved for example through successful marriages.

Within these dominant structures, it is also at times complicated for women to practise agentic behaviour. Younger generations of women appear to strive for better opportunities and for more agency than their parents possessed (Evans and Strauss 2010: 821). The success of this, however, is determined by the current social structures. As Charrad (2010: 518) notes, (female) agency should not be viewed merely as powerful opposition to dominant structures but as a capacity to act situatedly in ways that the relations of subordination allow. That is, women can also be able to gain agency by behaving in ways that are expected of them within a society. Therefore, when studying women's agency, social norms and available resources for women within the particular time and place are important matters (Charrad 2010: 519–520). Social factors, such as class, race and ethnicity, must also be linked to the opportunities of women to act and bring change (ibid.).

In summary, the concept of agency has been redefined and specified through historical processes, reflecting the shift from openly restricted female agency to the more nuanced limitations and opportunities defined by relations of dominance and subordination. Power being an essential feature of agency, lack of the resources needed for powerful action also significantly constrains agentic behaviour. Due to these aspects, women often negotiate the choices that they make and the action that they take, taking into account the possibilities which they have within the dominant social structures.

2.3 Representation of gender and agency in media for children and adolescents

Understanding of the reality of female agency can then be followed by knowledge of media representations: how female characters appear in media products draws from our reality, but maintaining certain media representations also has an impact of normalising particular perceptions and behaviour in societies. This section will discuss the development of female representation in media for children and adolescents, which is linked to the aims of third-wave feminism. In addition, Nickelodeon, the producer of ATLA, will be presented due to its distinctly empowering representations of female characters.

2.3.1 An overview of media representation: towards multifaceted gender portrayals

Socialisation happens in social interaction and creates ways of viewing the world in similar ways to others, as well as learning the rules that guide acceptable or "normal" social behaviour (Waksler 1991: 3). It is important to view whether a media product contributes to prevailing stereotypical

portrayals as they can affect young people's socialisation process: rigid expectations of gender roles, for example, can cause them to adopt attitudes and behaviours according to those gender roles despite not identifying with them (Fromme 2006: 15, Baker and Raney 2007: 27). So far, it seems that these stereotypical portrayals have prevailed rather resiliently. Female characters have traditionally been significantly underrepresented and when featured, they have been portrayed as being less active and less likely to voice their opinions as the male characters (Baker and Raney 2007: 26–27). They have also typically gained less responsibility, showed more affection, and been more dependent on others, as well as emphasized relationships more (Baker and Raney 2007: 26–27). While being affectionate and building relationships with other characters could make these female characters appear as sympathetic, most of the mentioned characteristics reflect a lack of agency, leaving the female characters in subordinate positions.

The traditional depictions of female characters in media have, however, been challenged, particularly later on with the arrival of third-wave feminism and an increasing number of female-written storylines. Baker and Raney (2007), who studied the representations of female and male superheroes in children's cartoons, already discovered that despite some gender-role stereotypical characteristics, the representation of female superheroes as equally powerful to the male ones has increased. In a more recent study, Curtis and Cardo (2018) also take into account the ways in which third-wave feminism has affected gender representations in the superhero comics and their film counterparts which they analyse. One of the important aspects they mention is female solidarity as a means of survival instead of viewing other women as threats like Gabriel et al. (2018) suggests in the context of workplace incivility. It has also been a significant change to present the women as both emotionally vulnerable and strong, capable of taking care of themselves (Curtis and Cardo 2018: 387–390).

As Baker and Raney (2007: 38) point out, it is more likely for viewers to identify with characters who are either similar to themselves in terms of gender, age, race, social class, and so on, or characters who are attractive or strong. Thus, girls and young women seeing female characters represented in certain ways appears to have a real impact on how they view themselves and the kinds of characteristics and behaviour they regard as the most desirable. The attention given to these more critical and intersectional feminist approaches is certainly a step towards more inclusive and empowering female representation.

2.3.2 Nickelodeon: an advocate for girl power?

Nickelodeon is one network which has been recognised as remarkable in terms of its representation of strong and intelligent female lead characters. As it is also the producer of ATLA, the object of this study, viewing the gender representations it has previously included in its shows will be useful in terms of the analysis. The target audience of Nickelodeon consists of both female and male children and adolescents, which Hentges and Kim (2013: 320–321) find to be a reason for its "explicitly gender neutral tone". This is shown in the way it includes a rather equal amount of male and female characters and displays both feminine and masculine characteristics among the characters despite of gender (Hentges and Kim 2013: 328).

These points about Nickelodeon's target audience include a couple of interesting aspects. On the one hand, they might aim to appeal to their male viewers by depicting female characters with stereotypically masculine traits, such as physical aggression, since research has suggested that boys might avoid watching programs with stereotypically feminine female lead characters (Hentges and Kim 2013: 324). On the other hand, they have taken into account their female audience and attempted to challenge the stereotypical gender roles by portraying confident, assertive, and clever female characters (Banet-Weiser 2004). Banet-Weiser (2004) discusses the notion of "girl power", for which Nickelodeon has been regarded as an advocate, aiming towards girl empowerment by viewing young girls and adolescents as an important consumer group.

Overall, Nickelodeon has certainly paved the way within children's networks in introducing diverse gender depictions, importantly, empowering female representation for young viewers. Target audience is one important aspect to consider when analysing these portrayals, and for Nickelodeon, the aim is to appeal to a wide audience including girls and boys. This, then, works as an appropriate basis for considering how the female agency and identities in *Avatar: The Last Airbender* have been represented.

3 PRESENT STUDY

This chapter introduces the main aim of the present study and the research questions that will guide the analysis. After that, the gathered data will be described. Lastly, the methods of analysis will be presented.

3.1 Aim and research questions

This study aims to analyse female agency in the animated series *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. In particular, the multimodal ways the authors have used to present the agency of the female characters in the show are of interest. Previous research has established similar aspects by using quantitative analysis to analyse stereotypical gender characteristics (e.g. Baker and Raney 2007, Hentges and Kim 2013, Jackson 2013) or focused on certain themes (e.g. Curtis and Cardo 2018). The results have included positive changes in the depictions of female agency. There are, however, little qualitative studies about animated series which focus on both the visual and the linguistic means to construct female agency, using a critical viewpoint. Thus, the present study aspires to answer the following questions:

1) What kind of agency is given to the female characters in the show through multimodal means?
2) What kinds of representations are constructed through the agency building?

These questions were formulated due to the need to understand more profoundly how a particular piece of animated media compares to the larger understanding of female representation in media. As mentioned, according to previous research, stereotypically feminine traits have been used to restrict the agency of female characters (Baker and Raney 2007). As Curtis and Cardo (2018: 387–390), however, point out, there can be complexity in the representations as female characters can be for example both emotional and strong. Thus, the goals of the present study are to examine closely the ways in which agency is given to the female characters and whether they reveal similar complexity, which the first question aims to answer. The second question adds to the first one as it intends to illuminate how certain kind of agency affects the perceptions that the target audiences form of these female characters. Especially young people often adopt role models through media products, which is why it is important to pay attention to media representations. In terms of *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, it is already explicit that the representation of female agency differs from many other animated series. This study, then, aims to reveal how exactly this has been done.

3.2 Data collection

Avatar: The Last Airbender or *Avatar: The Legend of Aang* (will henceforth be referred to as ATLA) is an American animated television series, which was created by Michael Dante DiMartino and Bryan

Konietzko. Nickelodeon Animation Studio broadcasted it for three seasons, from 2005 to 2008. ATLA takes place in a world which consists of four nations: the Water Tribes, Fire Nation, Earth Kingdom, and Air Nomads. Some of the people within these nations possess the skill of bending, which means the ability to control one of the four elements: water, fire, earth, or air. Avatar is the only person able to control all of the elements, and their responsibility is to maintain balance between the nations. ATLA is focused on Avatar Aang, a 12-year-old Air Nomad who was trapped inside of an iceberg for a hundred years, during which the Fire Nation declared a war on the other nations and extinguished the remaining generation of Air Nomads. Aang is discovered by Katara and Sokka, siblings from the Southern Water Tribe. Together with them, Aang begins his journey in studying all the elements and attempting to return harmony between the four nations.

ATLA has received wide acclaim from mass audiences and critics in terms of animation, characterization, and storyline. It deals with rather sombre themes yet does it in a way that makes it suitable for viewers of all ages, including a lot of humour and interesting processes of character development. Its inclusion of complex and diverse female characters is also notable since it presents a variety of girls and women across different ages, social classes, and nationalities. Thus, there are intersections of different identities present in these characters. Many of them can easily be characterized as strong, independent, and intelligent, yet the aim of this study is to further examine how their agency is constructed and represented in the series. Two main characters, Toph and Azula, were chosen for the analysis due to the limitations of the present study.

Toph Beifong is a 12-year-old girl and the daughter of Lao and Poppy Beifong, a respected noble family based in the Earth Kingdom. Despite her overprotective parents thinking that she is fragile and in need of constant protection due to her blindness, she is in reality an exceptionally talented earthbender. When she was five years old, she learned earthbending from badgermoles without her parents knowing and developed a way to locate objects and move according to them by feeling the vibrations of the ground with her feet. Because of this reason, she is forced to live a double life in order to express her talent – that is, until she meets Aang and the others.

Princess Azula is the 14-year-old daughter of Fire Lord Ozai and his wife Ursa, as well as the younger sister of Prince Zuko, forming with them the royal family of the Fire Nation. After banishing his son Zuko due to Zuko questioning his plans, Ozai sent Azula to chase Avatar Aang in order to continue ruling the nations. Being an extraordinarily skilful and brutal firebender since a child, Azula is constantly striving for perfection in her father's eyes.

The data for this study consists of six episodes from ATLA. It covers linguistic content which shapes the narrative in the series. It also contains visual aspects that create important contextual cues to the spoken discourse and convey different attitudes and ideologies. The data was collected by watching the episodes and writing transcripts on the chosen scenes. The transcripts included both the description of actual speech and the multimodal aspects, which seemed more effective in terms of time. I had two copies of the same transcripts in different files. The relevant linguistic material was colour-coded in the other and the multimodal content was treated in a similar way in the other for further analysis.

3.3 Methods of analysis

Since the aim of the study is to view language as social practise and critically observe the underlying power relations related to female agency both through linguistic and visual aspects, the qualitative methods of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MmCDA) are well suited for the purposes of this study. As mentioned, it is important to take into account, however, that in analysing the dialogue and actions of fictional characters in what is a scripted series, the linguistic and visual elements are conscious choices made by the creators. These choices, then, reflect the surrounding discourses in our real world, which is why they also make sense to us in the universe of ATLA.

A selection of multimodal elements was chosen for the analysis. The visual elements from Machin and Mayr (2012: 52, 74–76, 97–100) included angle, distance, poses, and setting. The characters were analysed based on whether they were depicted from an above or below angle, as well as close or far distance. Poses, whether rigid and straight or flexible and curved, were connected to the setting since the body language of the characters is fitted to a certain context in the series. In terms of linguistic elements, I used two items mentioned in Cervera, Postigo and Herrero (2006: 12–13) to analyse the data: vocabulary and politeness. Vocabulary in this study focuses on words and phrases that have been used to refer to the female characters in question or that are closely related to them. With politeness, the focus is on tone of voice and mitigations or the lack of them. These elements were chosen based on their ability to reveal relevant aspects of female agency in the show, as is presented in the text.

4 BENDERS OF POWER RELATIONS : STUDY RESULTS

In this section, the data from *Avatar: The Last Airbender* will be analysed both in terms of its visual elements and linguistic content. It consists of two separate subsections, one for each character, as well as a subsection in which the representation of agency of both female characters will be compared.

4.1 Toph

There is a stark contrast between how Toph behaves and dresses while living with her parents – an obedient and well-spoken girl in neat dresses – and in situations outside their estate in which her way of speaking is often harsh and straight-forward and her clothing more practical with loose sleeves and cuffs, her bangs hanging in front of her eyes. These are interesting aspects when doing analysis about how she is represented as a character in different ways and how that serves in giving or restricting her agency.

4.1.1 Visual aspects

This section will view and study visual elements, which the authors have used in order to construct Toph's agency or the lack of it. These elements include the use of angle and distance, poses, and the setting, all of which operate in creating the representation of Toph's capabilities and restrictions.

In episode six "The Blind Bandit" from season two, Toph's first appearance takes place at an earthbending competition in the Earth Kingdom where Aang, Katara and Sokka have gone to watch the show. Toph is fighting against the front runner the Boulder (DiMartino and Spaulding 2006: 0:06:25–0:08:01). Distance and angle are used to create representations of Toph's character from the moment when the host introduces her with the words "Now, the moment you've all been waiting for. The Boulder versus your champion: the Blind Bandit!" She is first shown from a close distance and from below, making her look bigger as she elevates the prize belt with firm arms, but immediately afterwards, the next frame shows her from a far distance next to the lady assistants who are twice her height. Thus, the size and angle are used to create a less convincing image of her, which Sokka's reaction "I think she is going down!" also reflects. Traditionally, showing the character from an above angle has made them seem vulnerable whereas a below angle gives them a sense of power (Machin and Mayr 2012: 100). She is also at first depicted from an above angle in contrast to the Boulder who is shown from a below angle nearly throughout the entire scene, even though Toph's body language

and mocking expressions do not reflect signs of insecurity. Yet, as Toph begins her attacks and reveals her actual skills, her face is completely calm and expressionless, and we are now looking up to her. The Boulder's facial expressions and body language are vehement and his forehead is shown up close with sweat drops on it. As Toph strikes his legs far apart with a rock stream, he is then shown up close and right from above, yelling with a comical look of pain on his face. This shows how Toph gains control over the Boulder. She is portrayed as a precise and skillful earthbender not only by words, but also by actions and body language.

Similar use of angles, distance and facial expressions can be seen in episode nineteen "The Guru" from season two, in which Toph has been captured in a metal cage by the host of the earthbending show, Xin Fu, and Toph's former earthbending teacher, Master Yu. They have teamed up in order to return her to her parents for a bounty (DiMartino and Volpe 2006: 0:05:30–0:06:14; 0:16:44–0:17:15; 0:21:02–0:21:34). The cage is made of metal because earthbenders have not learned to bend it yet. When showing the inside of the cage, Toph is depicted up close and right from above, and from this angle, the cage seems very small and restrictive. Her inner feelings become clear to the viewer: she is viewed close with a desperate expression, which then changes into concentration as she begins to figure out the impurities within metal, which is merely purified and refined earth. Close distance brings the viewer closer to the character and their thoughts and feelings, enabling the viewer to relate to them (Machin and Mayr 2012: 97). During the process in which she hits the cage and figures out a way to bend it, she is shown from below again. By moving the angle from up to down the viewer is being given the ability to witness Toph gaining control over the situation, in which she is quite literally trapped, while having access to her emotions and thought process.

In terms of poses, Toph is often depicted in the show with a confident and straight posture, arms and legs openly on her sides, which according to Machin and Mayr (2012: 74) takes more space and appears more masculine. In both of the episodes analysed here, she mostly takes these kinds of poses, as well. It is, however, interesting to take a closer look into her body language at the beginning of her introduction scene (DiMartino and Spaulding 2006) and how it relates to the way she is probably first being perceived in comparison to her counterpart in the context of the setting. The arena as the setting places Toph in an unfavourable-looking position per se since the presupposition is that the competitors there are large, physically strong men:

Episode 6, Season 2: "The Blind Bandit"
Katara: [sighs] This is just gonna be a bunch of guys chucking rocks at each other, isn't it?

Sokka: That's what I paid for.

The arena is also great in size, which makes Toph appear even smaller. The juxtaposition between the muscular Boulder, who has defeated men even larger than him, and the small blind girl is significant since both of their ways to pose at the beginning seem to reflect the expectations about them. The Boulder poses in ways similar to that of a bodybuilding contest as he talks to Toph in an arrogant way, which, while making him seem a little comical as well, shows his physical strength clearly. Toph, in turn, continues pointing at the Boulder and puts her hands on her cheeks in a cute but mischievous way with a more closed and curved body language as she mocks him. Curved torso, in contrast to a straight or rigid one, often creates a feminine impression (Machin and Mayr 2012: 74). This seems to depict Toph as an annoying little girl at first, but her poses later in their match display a lot more mature and composed character. Thus, Toph's character indicates that a character can be strong and agentic despite their physical appearance or common prejudices.

In the other episode (DiMartino and Volpe 2006), the setting works in constructing Toph's agency with the help of attributes and visual movement. The metal cage and the carriage are important objects in the scene as their purpose is to significantly restrict Toph's agency: she is helpless inside the small cage, the material of which she is unable to bend. It is also an interesting detail that during the entire time when the men are transferring Toph towards her parents, who have always prevented her from using her skills, the direction in which they are moving is left. It is only when Toph manages to escape from the cage and leaves after capturing the men in it that she is moving towards the right. It might be more common for Western viewers to interpret a movement from left to right as more natural and comfortable since most Western languages are written in that direction (Egizii et al. 2012: 9–10). The creators of ATLA are both American, which could be a reason why they would depict the journey towards Toph's parents with a right-to-left movement instead of vice versa and represent her gaining freedom and agency and moving forward as a left-to-right movement.

In summary, the multimodal means in ATLA have been used for Toph to gain agency but also have it taken away from her. In the situations where Toph is in control, she has been depicted from a below angle, which makes her appear powerful and agentic, as well as greater in size. Conversely, angles from above combined with a far distance have been used to represent her weaknesses or others' perceptions of them, such as when she is introduced as a small girl or when her bending skills are ineffective in a situation. Toph is also generally depicted with straight and more masculine poses, which depict her as more dominant. Settings in Toph's case are important as they have been designed

to restrict her agency, but it is shown how despite these restrictions, Toph manages to gain it for herself through her skills and determination.

4.1.2 Discourse choices

As stated previously, the ways in which Toph speaks, and she is spoken to are very different when she is in the estate with her parents and when she is outside of it with Aang and the others who have witnessed her real earthbending skills. These linguistic characteristics function in expressing how she is viewed and what kinds of representations her agency is being given within these different environments. The elements that will be analysed in this section are politeness and vocabulary.

Politeness – or the lack of it – is apparent in Toph's speech. Episode six "The Blind Bandit" from season two (DiMartino and Spaulding 2006: 0:11:50–0:12:38) presents Toph in the garden of her parents' estate. Aang, Katara and Sokka have managed to locate her after she lost to Aang in the earthbending contest. Despite being dressed in her fancy white dress with her elegant hair, the level of politeness on which Toph speaks to Aang and the others is no different than on the arena. She asks straight-forward questions with a firm tone of voice from Aang, such as "What are you doing here, Twinkletoes?" and "How did you find me?", implying that she does not feel the need to be polite with him. She also states with a dismissive hand movement that it is "not [her] problem" that Aang needs a skilful earthbending teacher in order to defeat the Fire Lord. While sitting at the dinner table with Toph's parents and Master Yu, Aang accidentally sneezes violently, which causes the food to fly in the faces of the guests. At this, Toph exclaims: "What's your problem?!" She also speaks in a rude and harsh manner to Xin Fu and others who capture her in "The Blind Bandit" (DiMartino and Spaulding 2006: 0:14:52–0:21:14) and to him and Master Yu in "The Guru" (DiMartino and Volpe 2006: 0:05:30–0:06:14):

Episode 6, Season 2: "The Blind Bandit"
Toph [hanging in a metal cage in the air]: You think you're so tough! Why don't you come up here so I can snap that grin off your face!
Xin Fu [frowning]: I'm not smiling.

Episode 19, Season 2: "The Guru"
Toph [inside the metal cage on a carriage]: Hey! Can you two old ladies quit bickering for a second? […] Let me outta here so I can kick both of your butts!

According to Cervera et al. (2006: 13), politeness reflects people's need to protect their "face needs", of which positive face describes the need to be liked and accepted by others while negative face determines one's will to do independent decisions without being impeded by others. Toph clearly does not feel the need to protect positive face needs with the characters mentioned here, which shows in her way of speaking. As Kiesling (2004) suggests, impoliteness can only be recognised when it differs from the norms of polite speech usually set by the dominant in societies. In Toph's case, the different settings create contrasts in her level of politeness: the way she speaks to her father, who she views as an authority, includes more hedging:

Episode 6, Season 2: "The Blind Bandit"
Toph: Dad. **I know** it's **probably** hard for you to see me this way, but the obedient little helpless blind girl that you think I am **just** isn't me.

Hedging, which usually makes one's utterances longer, has one function of making the speaker's statements less forceful in order to avoid undesired responses (Machin and Mayr 2012: 192, Kiesling 2004: 69). This is related to Cervera et al.'s (2006: 13) ideas of face needs. Toph's use of "I know", "probably" and "just" have this effect. It should be noted, however, that Toph is attempting to stand up for her father who she clearly respects, which is why politeness might not have such as strong effect on her agency specifically.

The word choices, that is, the vocabulary used in the speech of Toph and the characters who refer to her, are also significant as they describe her in certain ways and create representations of what she is capable of in the eyes of her parents and in reality. Her parents, especially her father, constantly describe her with words that depict Toph as being weak:

Episode 6, Season 2: "The Blind Bandit"
Katara: Toph! There's too many of them! We need an earthbender! We need you!
Toph's father [angrily]: My daughter is blind. She is **blind** and **tiny** and **helpless** and **fragile**. She cannot help you.

Here, "tiny", "helpless" and "fragile" are negative words which Toph's father uses to indicate how she perceives Toph as incapable. In his statement, there is also the presupposition that Toph's blindness is automatically a characteristic that reduces her agency to non-existent, which adds an intersectional dimension to the analysis. As Charrad (2010: 519–520) notes, other inherent qualities

of girls and women often restrict their agency, Toph's blindness being a central one at least in other people's eyes. Other words that are used in relation to Toph are "too dangerous", "too hot for her" (about food), "beginner's level", "scared", and "poor Toph". There are, however, also positive words that the characters describe Toph with:

Episode 6, Season 2: "The Blind Bandit"
Toph: I feel the vibrations in the earth, and I can see where everything is.
Aang: That's **amazing**.

Master Yu [at Toph's father, after Toph has won five strong male opponents]: I never knew! Your daughter's **amazing!** […] She's **the greatest earthbender I've ever seen**!

The phrases "amazing" and "the greatest earthbender I've ever seen" are used by others after Toph's skills have been revealed to them. While Aang did not have strong presumptions about Toph, her father and Master Yu have always viewed her as incompetent, which makes Master Yu's statement significant. Still, even when her father has seen Toph's skills himself, he announces that Toph needs even more protection. This could well be a parent's need to take care of their young child. However, it also reflects the reality for girls and women in society who, despite their capabilities, are not always taken seriously and denied agency, which Evans and Strauss (2010: 821) refer to in their study about the agency of Chinese women. Yet, Toph continues to believe in her own qualities and uses a similar phrase as Master Yu after she has trapped her captors:

Episode 19, Season 2: "The Guru"
Toph: I am **the greatest earthbender in the world**! Don't you two dunderheads ever forget!

Thus, Toph is, after all, aware of her capabilities. As her last statement suggests, she does not hide it nor does she seem to need validation from others in the form of politeness in the previous examples. In the case of her father, her hedging could reflect respectfulness and not lack of agency necessarily. Negative word choices that deny Toph's agency are also mostly used by her parents while others recognise her skills and independence as an earthbender, perhaps after initial presumptions.

4.2 Azula

In the series, Azula is cruel, manipulative, clever, and quick to learn. She reflects the qualities of her father in her leadership, appearing threatening and merciless to her subjects. This depiction is created with commanding words and harsh vocabulary, as well as stern facial expressions. There are, however, certain contexts in which Azula is unable to use these means to gain agency.

4.1.1 Visual aspects

Similar visual elements as with Toph's character will be analysed in this section. The angles and distance in the episodes chosen for Azula do not display her agency as explicitly as they do the one of Toph, but create important representations of her character nonetheless. Poses and facial expressions, as well as the role of the setting, however, reveal notable contrasts within her agency. They also connect to the nuances of female agency in society.

With Azula's character, angles and distance are often used in relation to the context she is in and in relation to the other characters she is interacting with. In the scene where she is introduced on her ship in episode one "The Avatar State" from season two (Ehasz et al. 2006: 0:03:45–0:05:09), the men on the ship are shown bowing down to the chair inside of which Azula is being carried. The first moments show her from the point of view of these men looking up to her, which depicts a person of power and in this context of higher status, as Machin and Mayr (2012: 100) suggest. However, the changes in angles from up-to-down perspective are not very noticeable for the rest of the scene, with Azula staying mostly on the eye level of the viewer and at times slightly below it. There are two times when she is shown directly from behind: first when she is looking at the men bowing down in front of her, and for the second time while she is "mulling over" throwing the captain of the ship overboard, viewing the sea. This provides the viewer with an access to Azula's point of view (Machin and Mayr 2012: 99). In terms of agency, seeing her perspective in this way makes her appear purposeful and confident.

In the scene, Azula is also often presented from a close distance, with a few very close shots of her facial expressions, especially eyes. Thus, her eyes, which have sharp and demanding expression in them, are presented as the most salient and something that should be paid attention to (Machin and Mayr 2012: 54–55). There are a couple of times when a further distance is used in the scene: when the captain runs towards Azula and when she has confronted him at the end of the scene. The second shot is interesting because the full-body shot, which the distance allows, shows Azula standing on the

slightly elevated path in the middle, through which she walked earlier. Accordingly, she appears the same height as or even taller than the captain who is standing next to the path, even though she is probably shorter in reality. Azula is, thus, given a sense of power through these visual choices.

Angle and distance are used quite similarly in the scene where Azula, her brother Zuko, Mai, and Ty Lee are on Ember Island where their old summer place is, attending a teenage party in episode five "The Beach" from season three (Mattila and Dos Santos 2007: 0:08:53–0:12:56). Azula is often depicted from the eye level of the viewer, but towards the end when she interacts with Chan, the guy who invited them to his party, Azula is shown from above. The above angle in this scene is connected to Azula's poses, body language and facial expressions, which, as her tone of voice, are significantly different from those in her introduction scene. On the ship, Azula's poses and body language are assertive and secure, with her arms behind her back, her stance straight, and her movements steady. As in the case of Toph, she is given a more masculine impression in this way (Machin and Mayr 2012: 74). Similarly as her way of speaking, these visual aspects provide her with a lot of agency in the context of giving orders to her subordinates.

It is noticeable, however, how this representation differs from the setting of the teenage party (Mattila and Dos Santos 2007), where the other teenagers are not familiar with Azula and the others' formal statuses, setting the social status of the other teenagers above them. Azula's body language and facial expressions in the beginning of the scene are similar to those she has been portrayed with earlier, but as the scene progresses, Azula seems to realise that she needs to behave in a different way in order to be accepted in this context. Her facial expressions become more gentle with less furrowed eyebrows, and she is seen with her arms crossed or holding a cup with her arms close to her body when she talks to Chan. The curved and closed body language, again, refers to a feminine representation (Machin and Mayr 2012: 74). When she is shown with Chan on the balcony in the romantic atmosphere with the view of the sea and stars, Azula is leaning on the railing with her back turned towards the door, expressing closed and vulnerable body language. Chan, in turn, leans on it with his front facing the same door openly, displaying confidence and security. Thus, Azula is acting in a more submissive and, perhaps, feminine, manner in relation to this male character, in order to gain his acceptance. This is an interesting change to her usually dominant, aggressive, and direct behaviour, which Litosseliti (2006: 128) regards as a masculine interactional style, and which she notes to usually achieve more agency in educational and vocational settings in real life.

All of these visual cues, then, demonstrate a shift in agency for Azula. Her character for most of the series is depicted in settings where she achieves her goals with her physical strength and firebending skills, by imposing fear on her subordinates, and by manipulating others. In those settings, her gender is of very little importance. On the contrary, in an environment unfamiliar to her such as the teenage party, Azula lacks similar agency. Regular teenage girls in this particular context are expected to behave in certain ways, which becomes clear as Azula talks with Ty Lee: regular teenage girls in the Fire Nation speak more softly, act in a flirty manner, and are submissive to the male characters. Referring back to Charrad (2010: 518), female agency is often negotiated in society by girls and women, and they can also be able to achieve agency by submitting to the behaviours that are expected of them, which Azula demonstrates.

4.1.2 Discourse choices

The multimodal ways of representing Azula's character as assertive, threatening, and strongly agentic yet losing these characteristics in another setting have now been presented. Similar patterns can be found in her speech. Politeness and vocabulary are analysed in this section as in the case of Toph.

Certain acts of politeness are seen to reveal power relations (Cervera et al. 2006: 13). From her introduction scene (Ehasz et al. 2006), it is made apparent that Azula possesses power over the other characters on the ship, which shows in her lack of politeness. She begins by giving harsh orders to her men:

Episode 1, Season 2: "The Avatar State"
Azula: […] I assure you, if you hesitate, I will not hesitate to bring you down. Dismissed.

Here, she does not use any mitigating speech acts that would make her appear pleasant, such as hedging, which Machin and Mayr (2012: 192) mention. The captain, in contrast, approaches and addresses Azula with politeness by using titles such as "Princess" and "Your Highness", as well the mitigating phrase "I'm afraid". There is a certain sense of politeness when Azula talks to the captain as well, but it appears that this way of speaking is used as a foundation for her next threat:

Captain: Princess. [bows] I'm afraid the tides will not allow us to bring the ship into port before nightfall.
Azula: I'm sorry, Captain, but I do not know much about the tides. Can you explain something to me?
Captain: Of course, Your Highness.

> Azula: Do the tides command this ship?
>
> Captain: Um, I'm afraid I don't understand.
>
> Azula: You said the tides would not allow us to bring the ship in. Do the tides command this ship?
>
> Captain: No, Princess.
>
> Azula: And if I were to have you thrown overboard, would the tides think twice about smashing you against the rocky shore?
>
> Captain: [swallows] No, Princess.
>
> Azula: Well then, maybe you should worry less about the tides who've already made their mind about killing you and worry more about me, who is still mulling it over.

Thus, she disagrees with the captain instantly by these tactics of intimidation, making it obvious that there is no other choice than to do what is desirable to her. Accordingly, her character appears to have the upper hand entirely and no actual politeness is needed on her part. Kiesling (2004: 70) notes that there are people who are "allowed" to be impolite, which refers to the ones in power. This describes Azula's character and her agency in an interesting way since powerful positions and, thus, impoliteness, are often connected to men and male characters.

The vocabulary that refers to or is closely related to Azula illustrates her skills and agency in the sense that she achieves her goals. Zuko describes her with these words in episode twenty "The Siege of the North Part 2" from season one (Ehasz and Filoni 2005: 0:04:20–0:04:31):

> Episode 20, Season 1: "The Siege of the North Part 2"
>
> Zuko: […] Everything always came **easy** to her. She's a firebending **prodigy**, and everyone **adores** her. My father says she was born **lucky**.

The words "easy" and "lucky" refer to the effortlessness with which Azula has accomplished things in the past and continues to do so. "Prodigy" is used to highlight her talents, which, together with the mentioned adjectives, makes her seem highly agentic. The word "adores" is interesting taking into consideration the way that Azula speaks to others, which was demonstrated above. In Fire Lord Ozai's view, strength, brutality and talent are the only valuable characteristics in a person. Thus, Zuko could perceive Azula to be adored by their father as she possesses these qualities. The next example from episode two "The Cave of Two Lovers" in season two (Hamilton and MacMullan 2006: 0:06:10–0:06:30), instead, further underlines Azula's menacing personality:

> Episode 2, Season 2: "The Cave of Two Lovers"

Zuko: We need to get help.

Iroh: But where are we going to go? We're enemies of the Earth Kingdom and fugitives from the Fire Nation.

Zuko: If the Earth Kingdom discovers us, they'll have us **killed**.

Iroh: But if the Fire Nation discovers us, we'll be turned over to Azula.

[both look at each other in agreement]

Zuko: Earth Kingdom it is.

Here, what is left unsaid is perhaps more important than what is said out loud. The word "killed" refers to the acts of Earth Kingdom and is contrasted with what Azula would do to Iroh and Zuko, which, apparently, is even worse. If Azula as a singular character is more threatening than the entire Earth Kingdom, she seems to possess a lot of power and control.

Once again, the setting is important in determining whether these characteristics provide Azula with agency or limit it. In the party (Mattila and Dos Santos 2007: 0:08:53–0:12:56**)**, Azula is jealous of the attention that Ty Lee receives from boys. Accordingly, she insults Ty Lee, but apologises when she starts crying and tells her the truth. Their exchange of words illustrates the impression that other people usually have of Azula:

Episode 1, Season 3: "The Beach"

Azula: […] for some reason when I meet boys they act as if I'm going to do something **horrible** to them.

Ty Lee: [chuckles] But you probably would do something horrible to them. I'm sure they're just **intimidated** by you.

Here, Ty Lee light-heartedly agrees that Azula's behaviour is usually threatening and aggressive, which in this particular situation does not work in Azula's favour. However, the word "intimidated" appears to include a possibility for Azula to still gain control of the situation, in other words, receive the attention of boys if she changes her usual behaviour. Another example of this is seen in the same episode on the balcony after Azula and Chan have kissed. Azula resorts back to the habits she is used to and blazes blue fire out of her hands while exclaiming:

Azula: Together, you and I will be the **strongest** couple in the world! We will **dominate** the Earth!

Chan: Uh, I gotta go. [smiles awkwardly and leaves slowly]

Being the "strongest" and "dominating" others, thus, are the ultimate goals of everything according to Azula's mindset. As can be analysed from Chan's reaction, however, Azula instantly loses the opportunity that she had before. Then, she spoke in a way that Chan and the other teenagers regard as "normal", the word which Chan uses in "The Beach". Previously, he had also called Azula "pretty" on the balcony. Besides Ty Lee, who calls her "the most beautiful smartest girl in the world" in the same episode, the characters in the episodes rarely comment on Azula's physical appearance as a female character but rather her personality and skills. This strikes as notable since Azula's character can be described as conventionally beautiful, but in the show, the agency that she gains herself is prioritised over those inherent qualities.

4.3 Comparison and overall representation

Comparing how the female characters in ATLA have been given agency through both visual and linguistic elements, there are many similarities between them but also differences that distinguish Toph and Azula from one another as nuanced characters. The visual material has important functions in the agency building. In the episodes analysed for Toph, angles and distance either increase or limit her agency: below angles and close distance depict her as bigger and more powerful whereas above angles and larger distance often cause her to appear smaller and helpless. For Azula, the use of angles and distance in her agency building does not seem to play such a significant role, but her poses, body language and facial expressions are important markers of whether she is in control or more submissive in the situation. Usually, in both of their cases, the poses and body language which give them agency are viewed as more masculine. Jackson (2013) examines the portrayals of gender-stereotypical traits in ATLA using content analysis and concludes that the stereotypically masculine depictions increase notably in Season 2 in the series. This is an interesting notion since that is the season when Toph and Azula are first introduced. Since masculinity and agency are closely connected in patriarchal societies, this an understandable result. The setting and context are meaningful for both characters as they rather clearly determine the agency of the characters: in environments where they are restricted by the expectations of society, their poses are more submissive and they have often been shown from above.

As for the linguistic elements, neither character speaks very politely in the show. This, however, is reflected differently in the way they possess agency. For Toph, impolite – or at least not noticeably polite – speech seems to be a part of her personality as a character, which is a tough and straight-forward earthbender. Her more polite speech, then, shows when she speaks to her father. Since ATLA is based on Asian cultures – even though not by Asian creators – this is probably a cultural connection

not as closely knit with agency building. For Azula, however, impoliteness is connected to the authority and power she has, or feels as if she has. Azula regards herself as above others, which describes her agency and her way of speaking. There are also differences between the vocabulary choices related to each character. Toph's lack of agency is rather straight-forwardly expressed with negative words that describe her as weak and helpless while positive words emphasising strength reflect her control and abilities. Azula's case, in contrast, is different and interesting because similar word choices are related to her agency in one context and to the lack of it in another. These are the words that describe her ruthless and dominant nature.

The representation of Azula's agency is also interesting since it is not often the case that a female character lacks agency in situations where they are expected to act in stereotypically feminine ways. This creates complexity to the characters and their connections to the surrounding patriarchal societies in which they have been placed in the show and thus, reflect Charrad's (2010) ideas about the situatedness of female agency. Toph, in part, manages to adapt to the different settings in a way that gains her the respect of others, but the actual agency is given to her when she makes the independent decision to flee from her parents and show her skills to the world. This is similar to the inspirational trope of a character finding their own will in a lot of animated media.

5 CONCLUSIONS

The aim of the present study was to observe the agency and its representation of the two female characters in ATLA, Toph and Azula, through limited sets of multimodal and linguistic elements. Including a variety of different female characters, ATLA offered an opportunity to focus on female characters that differ from traditional depictions. Based on the analysis, an overall statement can be made that Toph and Azula have both been given a lot of agency which is not inherently related to their genders. The visual elements (angle, distance, poses, setting) and linguistic elements (politeness, vocabulary) which were chosen as the tools of analysis, succeeded in revealing how the agency of the female characters is constructed in the show. While Toph's agency was restricted both verbally and physically using various visual and linguistic techniques in the episodes, Azula faced limitations in hers in an unfamiliar social situation where especially poses and body language, as well her physical appearance gained meaning. Toph is treated as fragile and helpless by her father, which, however, could be affected partly by her rather young age and her visual impairment. Thus, intersectional elements in Toph's case are important, and her gender might not be as significant in

restricting her agency as with Azula. When Azula is in control, her status and more masculine behaviours gain her agency, which is not strongly related to her gender. However, a context in which her status has no significance, the norms are unfamiliar to her, and gender roles are meaningful, she lacks agency.

Toph and Azula defy the traditions of female character representation that Baker and Raney (2007: 26–27) note in their research: the girls in ATLA are active, quick-witted, and independent. Neither of them are very affectionate, and Azula possesses a lot of responsibility. The representation of both characters is more in line with Curtis and Cardo's (2018) more recent study on gender representations in superhero comics and films, depicting these female characters as equally strong or even stronger than the male characters in the series. It is also notable that those contexts where the female characters are deprived of their agency are made to appear unusual to the viewer, meaning that their overall representations make them highly agentic in the series. As a result, the findings of this study suggest that these two characters can be included in Nickelodeon's collection of empowering, confident, and strong female characters (Banet-Weiser 2004). This information can be valuable in determining further directions for studies that take the approach and use the concepts of CDA, especially in relation to gender issues. They might also be interesting beyond the discipline of linguistics, relating closely for instance to the fields of media studies, gender studies, and sociology.

Being fairly small-scale, the present study has managed to analyse a very limited portion of material, albeit in detail. More diverse results could be achieved with a more thorough analysis of the series, using a larger amount of data. Further, in order to form general ideas about the representations of female agency in media for children and adolescents, various different media products should be included in the research. Important aspects in relation to the research questions of agency building and its representations would also have been the concept of identity and the intersections of one's different identities. These were very briefly mentioned due to the extent of this study. Looking forward, it would be an interesting target of research to continue with the concept of media representations, also including the intersections of for example ethnicity, class, or sexuality. These are areas of identity construction that have very real effects for individuals and societies at whole.

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