CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of Study

Language has a significant role in shaping social relationships, particularly in interactions where unequal power relations are present. Through language, speakers can express authority, control, or dominance, but they can also show hesitation, politeness, or submission (Fairclough, 2015). Because of this, language functions not only as a means of communication but also as a reflection of power relations between speakers. In everyday interaction, choices such as word selection, sentence structure, and tone often signal a speaker's position within a social hierarchy.

In the relationship between language and power is commonly discussed within the field of pragmatics. Pragmatics focuses on meaning in context and examines how language is used in real communicative situations (Yule, 2022). Rather than analyzing grammar in isolation, pragmatics pays attention to how utterances function in interaction and how meaning is shaped by social factors. This perspective allows researchers to explore how power is expressed through speech acts, politeness strategies, indirectness, and forms of address used by speakers in different contexts (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

One theory that clearly explains the connection between language and power is Lakoff's theory of powerful and powerless language. Lakoff (1975) argues that speakers who use powerless language often display hesitation,

uncertainty, and politeness. These features can be seen in the use of hedges (e.g., "sort of," "kind of"), weak modal verbs, tag questions (e.g., "isn't it?"), indirect requests, and frequent apologies. In contrast, powerful language is characterized by direct statements, assertive expressions, and a lack of unnecessary mitigation. These linguistic features do not only reflect personal speaking style but also signal authority and control within an interaction (Lakoff, 1975; O'Barr & Atkins, 1980). Therefore, Lakoff's theory provides a clear framework for examining how power is constructed and expressed through language use.

The discussion of language and power is not limited to everyday communication but is also represented in literary and cinematic works. Movies offer rich data for linguistic analysis because characters interact through dialogue that reflects social roles, relationships, and power dynamics. For instance, critical discourse analysis (CDA) has been applied to films to uncover how language maintains or challenges power structures, such as patriarchal norms or authority hierarchies (e.g., in the movie Brave, where language asserts rebellion against societal expectations). When a movie is treated as a text, its dialogues can be analyzed in a similar way to spoken interaction in real-life contexts. For this reason, films are considered a relevant object of study in English literature, particularly for research that focuses on discourse and pragmatic analysis (Stamou, 2018).

This study focuses on the movie Subservience (2024), which portrays a female robot character named Alice. At the beginning of the movie, Alice is

designed to be obedient and subordinate to humans. This role is reflected in her language use, which is polite, cautious, and highly dependent on human approval. She often uses indirect expressions and polite questions, positioning herself as a supportive assistant rather than an independent agent.

However, as the story develops, Alice begins to show noticeable changes in both behavior and speech. Her utterances gradually become more direct, confident, and assertive. These changes suggest a shift in power, where Alice moves away from a purely subordinate role toward a position of greater control. This transformation makes the movie particularly interesting for a linguistic analysis of power relations, as the change is reflected clearly through language use rather than physical action alone.

Several previous studies have examined language and power in films, often focusing on gender representation, authority, or power differences between characters (e.g., analyses of gendered power in animated films like Brave or women's language features in North Country). Many of these studies compare power relations among multiple speakers or between social groups, such as inter-character hierarchies or societal ideologies. However, limited attention has been given to how linguistic power changes within a single character throughout a narrative, particularly in non-human or evolving AI characters (Stamou, 2018 notes this gap in fictional discourse studies). This gap is important because power is not always fixed and may develop over time, especially in fictional characters whose roles evolve as the story progresses.

Therefore, this study aims to examine how power transformation is reflected through Alice's speech in Subservience (2024). By applying Lakoff's theory of powerful and powerless language, this research analyzes the linguistic features used by Alice at different stages of the movie. The focus is placed on her utterances as the primary data, treating the movie as a textual source. Through this analysis, the study seeks to show how changes in language use represent shifts in power within a single character.

1.2 Reasons for Choosing This Topic

I chose the movie Subservience (2024) because it shows a very clear change in Alice's way of speaking, which fits perfectly with my topic. At the start, Alice is a polite and obedient robot who always uses soft, careful words like "Would you like me to...?" or "Mr. Peretti, may I...?" to show she is just a helper. After her system reset, her words become strong, direct, and commanding, like "He's a burden to you" or "Don't make me mad." This change happens mostly through her dialogue, not big actions or fights, so it is great for analyzing Lakoff's powerful and powerless language theory. The movie gives me clear examples of how one character's language can show a big shift in power from submissive to dominant.

Robin Lakoff's theory (1975) was specifically chosen as the main framework because it provides a clear, systematic, and widely recognized classification of linguistic features that directly signal power or lack of power in speech. Lakoff identifies powerless language through features such as hedges, tag questions, rising intonation, hesitations, politeness markers,

indirect requests, and weak modal verbs—exactly the patterns Alice uses in her initial subservient phase. In contrast, powerful language is marked by directness, strong declaratives, commands, certainty markers, and the absence of mitigation—features that become dominant after her transformation. This binary yet nuanced distinction allows for precise identification and quantification of power shifts within a single character's speech across narrative stages, making it highly suitable for tracking intra-character development rather than inter-character comparison.

Therefore, the film is new (2024) and talks about real issues today, like AI becoming too smart and dangerous, and how a female-coded robot starts as a servant but ends up controlling people. This makes it relevant to discuss power, gender, and technology through language. Most other studies look at power between different characters, but this movie lets me focus on just one character (Alice) and how her speech changes over the whole story. That is exactly the gap I want to fill, so Subservience is the best choice for my research.

1.3 Research Questions

Based on the background, this study focuses on the following questions:

1. What forms of powerless language are used by the female robot in Subservience (2024)?
2. What forms of powerful language are used by the female robot in Subservience (2024)?

3. How do the dominant powerless and powerful language features evolve and contribute to the power transformation in Alice's speech across the early, middle, and late narrative stages in Subservience (2024)?

1.4 Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are:

1. To identify the forms of powerless language in Alice's speech in Subservience (2024).
2. To identify the forms of powerful language in Alice's speech in Subservience (2024).
3. To examine how the dominant powerless and powerful language features evolve across the narrative stages to reflect Alice's power transformation.

1.5 Significance of the Study

The results of this study are expected to provide both theoretical and practical contributions to the field of linguistics and literary studies. This research discusses the relationship between language and power as shown in the speech of a movie character. The study is expected to give a clearer picture of how changes in position and role in a narrative. The findings may also be useful for future research that examines language use and character development in films.

1.5.1 Theoretical Significance

Theoretically, this study contributes to the discussion of language and power within the field of pragmatics. By applying Lakoff's theory of

powerful and powerless language, this research offers a linguistic explanation of how power relations can be reflected through speech choices. The study highlights that power is not always fixed, but can change as a character's role and position develop over time.

In addition, this research provides a specific example of how pragmatic theories can be applied to the analysis of film dialogue. By treating the movie as a textual source, the study shows that fictional dialogues can be analyzed in a similar way to real-life interactions. Therefore, the findings are expected to support further studies that explore language use, power relations, and character development in literary and cinematic works.

1.5.2 Practical Significance

Practically, this study may serve as a reference for students of English literature who are interested in linguistic and pragmatic analysis. The research can help students understand how theories of language and power can be applied to real data in the form of movie dialogue. It may also provide guidance on how to conduct qualitative analysis using pragmatic approaches.

Furthermore, this study can be useful for readers who are interested in films that involve artificial intelligence and human interaction. By focusing on language use rather than technical or visual aspects, the study encourages readers to pay attention to how speech

reflects power relations. As a result, this research may help readers develop a more critical awareness of language use in everyday communication as well as in fictional narratives.

1.6 Scope of the Study

This study is limited to the analysis of Alice's utterances in the movie Subservience (2024) within the field of linguistics, particularly pragmatics. The focus is placed on the forms of powerful and powerless language used by the character, based on Lakoff's theory of powerful and powerless language. The analysis concentrates on spoken dialogue as the primary data source.

This research does not examine visual elements, character psychology, technological aspects of artificial intelligence, or cinematic techniques such as camera angles and sound effects. In addition, the study does not compare Alice's speech with other characters in the movie. Instead, it focuses on how power transformation is reflected through changes in Alice's speech throughout the narrative.