



Exploring Types of Language Functions in *Mufasa from The Lion King* Movie

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Abstract

This study examines the language functions used by Mufasa in *Mufasa: The Lion King* and the contexts in which they appear. Previous research has applied Jakobson's model to film dialogue, but most focus on adult or action-based characters, leaving little attention to symbolic figures in animated films. This study addresses that gap by analyzing Mufasa, a character whose speech reflects leadership, morality, and emotional guidance. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, 120 utterances from the film's official script were collected, coded, and categorized according to Jakobson's six functions: referential, emotive, conative, phatic, metalingual, and poetic. Contextual details such as tone, setting, and conversational partner were also considered to ensure accuracy. The results show that Mufasa's speech is dominated by the referential, emotive, and conative functions (24 utterances each, 20%), followed by metalingual and poetic (18 utterances each, 15%), and phatic (12 utterances, 10%). Referential utterances conveyed facts and knowledge, emotive ones expressed love or concern, and conative statements directed Simba's actions. Metalingual and poetic functions added clarification and symbolic imagery, while phatic expressions maintained social bonds. These findings demonstrate that Mufasa's language is intentional and multifaceted, reinforcing his role as father, mentor, and king while showing how animated films use language to convey values and relationships.

Keywords: *Language Functions, Mufasa, The Lion King*

Introduction

Language is one of the most powerful tools used by human to connect with each other. It evolves with history, society, and technology (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2021) and varies across context, speaker, and audience (Wang, Jin, & Li, 2023). Films illustrate this clearly, as characters communicate through words, songs, gestures, and symbols that shape relationships, reveal themes, and influence audience perception. Jakobson's (1960) six language functions—referential, emotive, conative, phatic,

metalingual, and poetic—often overlap in communication (Waugh, 2021) and are visible in film dialogue, narration, and songs, such as when a character conveys sadness through emotive speech while also using the poetic function in music.

Jakobson's (1960) model of six language functions—referential, emotive, conative, phatic, metalingual, and poetic—provides the most suitable framework for this analysis. It captures the multiple purposes of speech, from giving information to expressing feelings, guiding actions, maintaining connection, clarifying meaning, and creating symbolic imagery. Because Mufasa's dialogue combines instruction, emotion, and symbolism, Jakobson's framework allows for a nuanced analysis that simpler models of communication would not adequately address. This approach also builds on prior work, such as Dewi (2024), who showed how animated films like *Frozen II* reflect real-life communication patterns relevant to education and social development.

Most studies on language functions have focused on classrooms, advertisements, speeches, or social media, with a few applying Jakobson's theory to film dialogue. These, however, often examine adult-oriented or literature-based films, while animated or Disney films—rich in symbolism, emotion, and moral lessons—remain underexplored. This study fills that gap by analyzing *Mufasa: The Lion King*, which shifts the narrative from Simba to Mufasa, tracing his childhood, struggles, and rise to leadership. The film illustrates how language conveys values, inspires trust, expresses emotion, and shapes decisions. Mufasa's speeches motivate others, while Taka (Scar) uses persuasive language to express jealousy and betrayal.

Other characters also reflect Jakobson's six functions: Rafiki explains traditions (metalingual), and Timon and Pumbaa use humor and casual talk (phatic) to strengthen bonds. Previous research confirms the richness of language in films: Adinata and Putri (2025) found representational and interpersonal functions in *Spiderman: No Way Home*; Haya and Wulandari (2024) showed how *Five Feet Apart* reflected emotion and relationships; Ginting and Revelen (2022) highlighted language as action in *Angel Has Fallen*. Yet none focus on Mufasa, whose story uniquely centers on leadership, betrayal, and destiny.

This study is novel because it examines how Mufasa in *The Lion King* uses language to convey values, resolve conflict, and influence others. Unlike earlier research that focuses on modern or action-oriented characters, this study highlights a symbolic figure whose speech represents leadership, morality, and emotional guidance. The novelty lies in showing how Mufasa's dialogue functions not only as character development but also as a model of purposeful communication that teaches responsibility and shapes relationships. Using Jakobson's model of language functions (Hébert & Tabler, 2019; Linask, 2018), the study identifies the types of functions Mufasa employs and the contexts in which they occur. In doing so, it contributes to understanding how animated films reflect human behavior and values while offering practical insight for linguistics and media literacy.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine how language functions are used by Mufasa in *The Lion King*, focusing on the types that appear in the script and the contexts in which they occur. By analyzing his speech, the study shows how communication expresses emotions, builds relationships, resolves conflicts, and conveys themes such as leadership, betrayal, and destiny. The guiding research question is: *What types of language functions are used by Mufasa in The Lion King, and in what contexts do they appear?* This research demonstrates that recognizing language functions can help viewers, especially students, understand how language shapes both stories and real-life ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving.

Method

This study employed descriptive qualitative approach designed to capture the meaning and dimensions of human communication in context (Mackey & Gass, 2022). The primary data source was the official script of Mufasa: *The Lion King*, which was verified against a published version released by a credible film database to ensure accuracy. All of Mufasa's utterances were extracted as the unit of analysis, with each "utterance" defined as a complete segment of speech marked by a clear pause, change of speaker, or punctuation indicating closure. In total, 120 utterances were identified and analyzed. Data were collected systematically. Utterances were isolated, organized chronologically, and coded with contextual details such as setting, tone, and conversational partner.

Analysis applied Jakobson's (1960) six functions—referential, emotive, conative, phatic, metalingual, and poetic—by identifying the dominant function in each utterance while noting overlaps. To ensure reliability, a second coder reviewed part of the data, and any differences were resolved through discussion. Findings were presented in descriptive tables and supported with script examples and contextual explanations. The findings were presented through descriptive tables and illustrative examples from the script, with contextual narratives telling how language use aligned with character development and thematic concerns. This method has some limitations. Relying on the written script excludes non-verbal features such as intonation, gestures, or soundtrack cues, which may influence interpretation. Even so, the verified source, systematic coding, and reliability checks provided a solid basis for interpreting how Mufasa's language contributes to character development and the film's central themes.

Results

Jakobson (1960) proposed that language serves six primary functions, such as: referential, emotive, conative, phatic, metalingual, and poetic. In *The Lion King*, Mufasa's character uses language that embodies several of these functions, especially in how he communicates values, instructions, and emotions to his son Simba. His dialogue is rich with both content and intent, aligning well with Jakobson's model of communication.

Table 1: *Table of Language Function Found in Mufasa's Utterances*

No	Type of Language Functions	Percentage	Total Utterances
1	Referential Function or Conveying Information	20%	24
2	Emotive Function or Expressing the Speaker's Feelings	20%	24
3	Conative Function or Directing the Listener	20%	24
4	Phatic Function or Maintaining Contact	10%	12
5	Metalingual Function or Clarifying Language Use	15%	18
6	Poetic Function or Focus on Form and Style	15%	18
		100%	120

The table shows the distribution of Jakobson's language functions in Mufasa's speech. The dominant functions—referential, emotive, and conative—each make up 20%, reflecting his role in giving knowledge, expressing care, and guiding Simba. Metalingual and poetic functions (15% each) appear in clarifications and symbolic imagery, while the phatic function (10%) maintains interaction and connection. In brief, Mufasa's language was purposeful and carefully structured to teach, guide, and emotionally connect, reflecting his role as leader, mentor, and father.

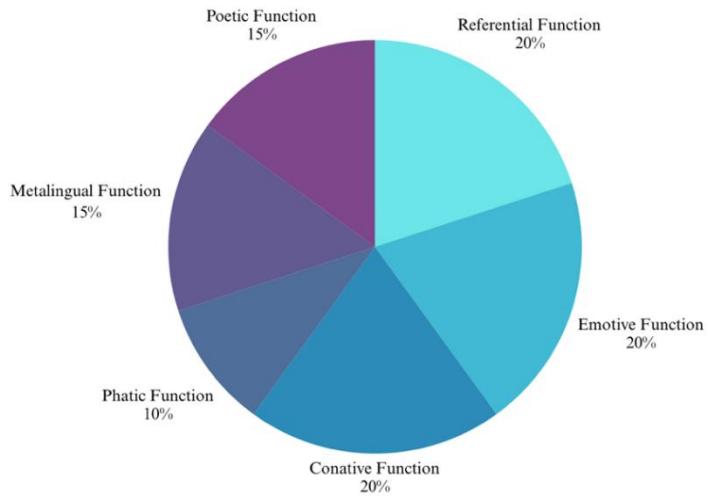


Figure 1. *Chart of Language Function Found in Mufasa's Utterances*

Referential Function or Conveying Information

Data 1

Mufasa: Every being has a place in the **Circle of Life**

Taka: Brother, my breath is your breath.

(Source: Jenkins, 2024)

In this example, Mufasa, as both the main character and speaker, uses the referential function when stating, “Every being has a place in the Circle of Life.” His words provide factual information about the natural order of the Pride Lands, emphasizing that all creatures are connected and play a role in maintaining harmony. The focus is on informing the listener rather than expressing emotion or giving commands. This is clear instance of referential language (Linask, 2018). Out of the 24 referential utterances identified (20% of his total speech), many occur in teaching moments where Mufasa explains values, traditions, or duties to Simba. The choice of words—“every being” and “Circle of Life”—broadens the scope beyond just lions, turning the statement into a cultural principle. Context also matters here: Mufasa speaks as a mentor during a calm setting for his role as father and king. This overlap shows Mufasa’s language often combines explanation with inspiration.

Emotive Function or Expressing the Speaker's Feelings

Data 2

Mufasa: **You deliberately disobeyed me**

Simba: I know

(Source: Jenkins, 2024)

Jakobson's emotive function reflects the speaker's feelings or attitude (Hébert & Tabler, 2019). Mufasa uses it when telling Simba, "You deliberately disobeyed me," expressing frustration and concern rather as simply stating a fact. His words convey disappointment and seriousness the emotional impact of Simba's actions. Out of the 24 emotive utterances identified (20% of Mufasa's speech), many occur in father-son interactions, where emotions of love, concern, or disappointment are central. Context plays an important role here: the line occurs after Simba has placed himself in danger, which heightens Mufasa's urgency. While the primary function is emotive, the same utterance could also be read as conative, since it implicitly urges Simba to reflect on his actions. This overlap illustrates how Mufasa's language often serves multiple purposes at once.

Conative Function or Directing the Listener

Data 3

Mufasa: **You must take your place in the Circle of Life**

Simba: You have forgotten who you are and so have forgotten me

(Source: Jenkins, 2024)

The conative function seeks to influence the listener (Linask, 2018). Mufasa uses it when telling Simba, "You must take your place in the Circle of Life," directing him toward his responsibilities. Out of the 24 referential utterances identified (20% of his total speech), Mufasa delivers this line during a pivotal exchange about identity, speaking both as a father and as king. The utterance clearly functions conatively, but it also carries referential weight by reminding Simba of the broader natural order, and poetic qualities through the imagery of the "Circle of Life." This overlap shows how Mufasa's speech often serves multiple purposes at once—teaching, directing, and inspiring simultaneously.

Phatic Function or Maintaining Contact

Data 4

Mufasa: **Let's go home**

Taka: Let's go my brother

(Source: Jenkins, 2024)

The phatic function serves to establish or maintain communication (Waugh, 2021). In this example, Mufasa uses the brief utterance “Let’s go home” not to give information or instructions, but to sustain interaction and reinforce his bond with the listener. Out of the 12 referential utterances identified (10% of his total speech), the line offers reassurance to maintaining harmony without explicitly discussing emotions. By keeping the channel of communication open, Mufasa affirms presence and solidarity. So simple expressions can build trust and preserve relationships.

Metalingual Function or Clarifying Language Use

Data 5

Mufasa: **As king, you are more than what you have become**

Simba: How can I be?

(Source: Jenkins, 2024)

The metalingual function occurs when language explains or clarifies itself (Hébert & Tabler, 2019). Mufasa demonstrates this in the line, “As king, you are more than what you have become,” which defines Simba’s role and his actions that fall short of its meaning. Instead of giving facts or instructions, Mufasa explains the concept of kingship, contrasting Simba’s current state with his true potential. This reflection encourages Simba to reconsider the definition and responsibilities of a king. Out of the 15 referential utterances identified (18% of his total speech), Mufasa uses metalingual language to refine Simba’s self-perception and guide him toward his duty.

Poetic Function or Focus on Form and Style**Data 6**

Mufasa: Everything the light touches is our kingdom

Young simba: But a king's time as ruler rises and falls like the sun.

(Source: Jenkins, 2024)

Jakobson's poetic function means the beauty and structure of language (Todorović et al., 2017). Mufasa demonstrates this when he says, "Everything the light touches is our kingdom," turning a factual idea into a vivid, symbolic expression. The metaphor of "light" represents prosperity, safety, and territory, while "our kingdom" personalizes the message. Out of the 15 referential utterances identified (18% of his total speech), Mufasa imagery inspires the listener and creates a lasting mental picture of the Pride Lands, elevating the line beyond plain description into something ceremonial and timeless.

Discussion

The findings show that Mufasa's speech in The Lion King makes purposeful use of Jakobson's six language functions. The most frequent are referential, emotive, and conative (20% each), reflecting his dual role as mentor and father: he conveys knowledge about the Circle of Life, expresses affection and concern for Simba, and directs Simba toward responsibility and maturity. Metalingual and poetic functions (15% each) add depth by clarifying abstract ideas such as leadership and by using symbolic imagery—"Everything the light touches is our kingdom"—to inspire. Though least frequent, the phatic function (10%) still reinforces intimacy and social bonds, as in the nurturing phrase "Let's go home."

This distribution illustrates how Mufasa's speech combines information, emotion, and symbolism, serving both narrative and relational purposes. Viewed through a sociolinguistic lens, his dialogue embodies language as a tool for shaping identity, power, and social connection. This contributed to broader discourse analysis by showing how animated films use language to also model values and interpersonal relationships. Compared with Elsa in Frozen II (Dewi, 2024) or Stella Grant in Five Feet Apart (Haya & Wulandari, 2024), Mufasa's speech stands out for blending authority with emotional resonance.

This has practical implications: in language education, his dialogue can be used to teach pragmatics, metaphor, and persuasion; in media literacy, it illustrates how storytelling reflects cultural norms of leadership and family. However, the focus on script data limits attention to non-verbal features such as intonation, gesture, and music, while centering only on Mufasa overlooks how other characters contribute to meaning. Future research could examine Scar's persuasive rhetoric, Rafiki's

metalingual guidance, or cross-cultural audience interpretations to deepen understanding of how animated narratives shape both discourse and cultural imagination.

Conclusion

Mufasa's speech in The Lion King, analyzed through Jakobson's six language functions, shows how intentional and layered his communication is. The dominant functions—referential, emotive, and conative—reflect his role as mentor and father: he imparts knowledge about leadership, expresses care and concern, and directs Simba's actions. Less frequent functions—metalingual, poetic, and phatic—add depth by clarifying meaning, using symbolic imagery, and maintaining connection. Together, these functions shape Simba's moral framework and emotional growth. However, this study has some limitations.

Focusing mainly on Mufasa's iconic lines may underrepresent certain functions, and including other characters such as Simba, Scar, or Rafiki could provide a fuller picture. Audience interpretation and cultural context also influence how the language is understood. Even so, the findings are significant. Theoretically, they confirm the value of Jakobson's model for analyzing film dialogue. Practically, they show how animated films can teach values, build relationships, and foster media literacy. So, Mufasa's speech shows purposeful communication to educate and emotionally resonates with audiences.

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