

Review: Lukas Bleichenbacher (2008)
Multilingualism in the Movies: Hollywood Characters and their Language Choices. Narr Francke Attempto Verlag GmbH, KG, Schweizer Anglistische Arbeiten, Band 135.

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Films can be influential and can contribute to the construction of stereotypes and prejudices. Whether the use of marked accents and social dialects perpetrates some forms of marginalisation or discrimination of certain ethnic and social groups is an issue that is addressed by Lukas Bleichenbacher. His analysis looks at the psychology of Hollywood films and the phenomena of multilingualism in the dialogue of thirty-two recent Hollywood films. This is an original book, as very little research has been conducted on the way accents and foreign languages are used to give the illusion of verisimilitude. Lippi-Green (1997) conducted a quantitative analysis of accents in animated films by Walt Disney. She showed that foreign accents tended to demonise the characters that use them and build up misrecognition of certain ethnic groups. Bleichenbacher's study of manifestations of multilingualism is also based on an approach to film dialogue that is both qualitative and quantitative.

One would commonly distinguish societal plurilingualism ('the social reasons for and manifestations of language contact') and its corollary individual plurilingualism defined as 'an individual speaker's ability to speak more than one language' (Bleichenbacher 2008, 9). The films used in this study originate from different sources (comedies, action movies, thrillers or historical dramas) and were released between 1984 and 2003. The author

focuses on films where major European languages such as Spanish, French, German or Russian are dominant. They have proved mainstream on the basis of their worldwide popularity with the public. The films under investigation include high budget films like Milos Forman's *Amadeus*, World War II films such as *The Pianist* and *Schindler's List* and the James Bond movies.

In his book, Bleichenbacher asks himself whether the foreigner in films is necessarily the antagonist, and whether characters with an accent are participating in a form of Manichaeism. Multilingualism, he reminds us, is in Western cultures associated with Judeo-Christian sin. Originally, the multiplicity of languages symbolised by the Tower of Babel in Genesis was the consequence of God's wrath and man's going astray from the Word of God (Bleichenbacher 2008, 8). Having erected out of *hubris* a tower that reached the heavens, the original divine language fractured into multiple languages (the confusion of tongues in the biblical account). If the language of Satan deludes and serves evil purposes, that of the Son is pure harmony and primeval Hebrew was the Edenic language. We are told in the Bible that 'the whole earth was of one language and of one speech' (Genesis 11). Behind the multiplicity of languages and behind the colourful allure of Satan that led to the Fall is hidden the essence of God's divine word. Evil characters that plan to destroy the planet are often portrayed speaking with an accent. Archetypal of Hollywood action films, they are like Fallen Satan: intending to elevate themselves to the status of God, they finally fall from the sublime to the bathetic.

In films, multilingualism is not only associated with a sense of original sin, but also with chaos and lack of harmony. Renoir's classic *La Grande illusion* (1937) takes place in a multilingual environment with German officers mingling with French, German and Russian prisoners. Language differences create tension, degrees of formality or informality, or sometimes a sense of solidarity. Boeldieu (Pierre Fresnay) communicates with Rauffenstein (Von Stroheim) in English, as they share the same upper class background. In the film's Manichean representation, German is the language of the enemy. Strong language prejudice towards German, as a recent newspaper survey

has shown, is fostered by its representation in World War II films as the language of evil Nazis and apparently dissuades French schoolchildren from learning the language (Bleichenbacher 2008, 1). In *La Grande illusion* however, the encounter of Maréchal (Jean Gabin) with Elsa (Dita Parlo) in Switzerland gives German positive connotations. Elsa's soft and mellow pronunciation is an obvious counterpoint to the harsh intonation of Rauffenstein whose German is mostly used to give orders. In spite of the inability of both Maréchal and Elsa to use the other's language, except with small amounts of German for the former, the film reaches a moment of concord in the Christmas Eve scene. Silence, characters' body language as well as music overcome the language barrier.

Different strategies used by filmmakers to present manifestations of language contact and code switching in the movies can nurture linguistic stereotyping and influence viewers' stigmatisation of characters, reinforcing the dichotomy between good and evil. These include second language accents, lack of idiomatic expressions, interference of L2 words in L1 and many other interlanguage devices, such as the use of subtitles, intertitles and interpreting.

The way foreigners are represented is often hardly plausible, but the spectator has 'a more or less stable set of assumptions' (Bordwell quoted by Bleichenbacher, 26) and exhibits what Keats in the 19th century described as *negative capability*: accepting without questioning the fact that Amadeus could speak English or that German officers during World War II or that Poles in Warsaw ghettos communicate in English among themselves. The viewer is therefore aware of himself or herself watching a fiction which is to a greater or lesser extent realistic. The use of English as the main language is at any rate financially oriented: it is necessary to make the film more easily exportable.

Lippi-Green has shown that characters with mainstream varieties of English are the positive characters in Disney's animated films. Speakers of other varieties of English tend to be marginalised. The depiction of a sense of foreignness either conveys humour or lends a sense of exoticism to the film.

Conein and F. Gadet note that accent immediately produces an effect of strangeness (1998, 108). One would generally bestow strong accents on backward simple-minded characters often from a rural part. Even by the time of Molière's comedies, the vernacular of peasants was used for comic purposes as well as partaking stereotypically in the depiction of the grotesque. The use of dialects or regional accents still has strong negative connotations in the movies. There are a certain number of prototypical ideas which will immediately associate an accent or a culture with common stereotypes. A French accent will broadly connote high culture, food and fashion or be perceived as the element of romance. From Carole Bouquet to Sophie Marceau, Emmanuel Béart and Juliette Binoche, French actresses are used not only for their acting talents but also for their charm and sensuality, which is partly conveyed by their accent. The broken English accent tinged with a strong Spanish accent will be on the contrary the mark of the *bandido* in Hollywood films. The Mexican accented Tuco in *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, played by Eli Wallach represents the ugly. The tendency for a non-English speaker to express himself with an ungrammatical or simplified English will immediately rate him as uneducated and negative.

In *Amadeus*, the Austrian composer played by Tom Hulce speaks with an American accent and the purely British RP accent is strictly limited to members of the aristocracy. RP speakers are in general in movies snobbish, arrogant characters, although as Bleichenbacher suggests the social contrast between American and English speaking characters does not always bestow 'instances of positive and negative characterization' (2008, 62). The character of James Bond originally performed in the first episode by the distinguished and politically correct Roger Moore is a bit of an exception, as he is hardly negative. James Bond is the embodiment of the loyal secret agent working for Her Majesty the Queen, but standard English is in Hollywood films the privilege of the powerful and the educated. As for the villainous masterminds, as Bleichenbacher rightly observes, they are also portrayed as speaking fluent standard English.

A straightforward way to give a film a sense of foreignness is to specify its geographic location by means of superimposed titles. In the opening scene of *The Pianist*, the intertitle 'Warsaw 1939' or a sign in Polish suffices to give the film a Polish setting and 'colour'. A German officer speaking English with or without a German accent will then be used to replace what in reality will be a variety of German. To make a character sound German, the tag 'ja' would be included in his lines or a German patronym will straight away establish him as German. Interjections in French that viewers can understand whatever their linguistic and social background such as 'eh bien' or 'bon' are clues which will signal French characters. Grammatical mistakes in varieties of English also quite significantly mark someone as foreign.

Multilingualism in Hollywood films is often used for contrast rather than for sociolinguistic realism, which tends to produce a linguistic picture of a society dominated by English and where L2 characters 'are often minor, comical, less powerful or even downright negative characters' (Bleichenbacher 2008, 90). The dichotomy between good and bad, Eros and Thanatos, is still the norm. A non-English speaker is more likely to have less importance in the film narrative as well as being attributed a less glamorous job. Although each viewer forges his/her opinion of the characters of a film and it depends intrinsically on the nature of the story, the author shows that some characters are either all white, or all black morally, but some are rather neutral or mixed, although generally the more neutral they are the less important they are for the narrative.

If in 1930's French cinema, the use of slang was commonly associated with the underworld (Abecassis 2005), statistics conducted on Hollywood films (Bleichenbacher 2008, 116) show that multilingual characters are frequently linked with criminal occupations. Not only does a marked accent appear suspicious, but it proves rightly so.

Bleichenbacher's study is unique and his quantitative observations are clearly illustrated with graphs. We hope that future researchers would use similar methods to pursue these findings further. It would be interesting to analyse how multilingual forms of speech were used in for instance 1930s

Hollywood cinema and see how the stigmatisation between English speakers and non-English speakers and between the good and evil characters have evolved. Also, one would like to know how French, Spanish or German movies respectively represent multilingualism in their films, whether it is calqued on Hollywood representations of foreigners and whether it shows ideological patterns. More recently the success of *La Vérité si je mens* (1997, 2001) with Jewish pied-noir accents and *Bienvenue chez les ch'tis* (2008) with its caricature of Northern French accent illustrates how contemporary French cinema uses phonological features as the major ingredient of French comedies. Accented cinema, however, is not exclusively associated with comedies. The emergence of *Beur* and *banlieue* films is the expression of 'a collective identity' (Naficy 2001, 95) in the making for exiled North African filmmakers. There is scope here for quite a few studies.

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