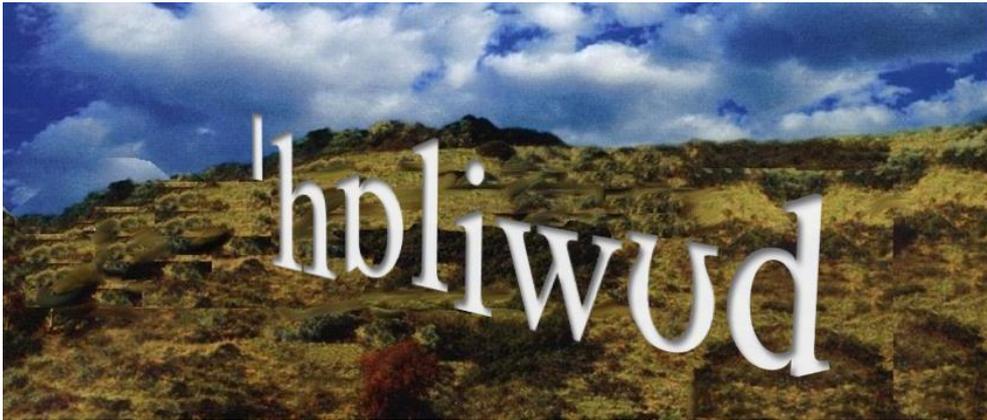




How do movie characters' accents reflect linguistic stereotypes and prejudices?



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• Agenda

- the variety/accents/dialects described
 - phonetic/phonological characteristics
- stereotypes in the Hollywood film industry
 - intro
 - the stereotypes
 - the roots of the stereotypes
 - examples
- conclusion





1. The variety described

RP – BBC English – Queen's English – Standard British English

variety – dialect – accent

- dialect: any variety of language spoken by members of a speech community;
- accent: pronunciation typical of a speech community (cf. native vs foreign accents)





- Types of linguistic difference between dialects:
 - in vocabulary,
 - in pronunciation,
 - in syntax,
 - ... in all areas of linguistic structure.





- Focus of investigation: pronunciation differences

Why?

- films: spoken language,
- easiest to identify most of the features even for the layperson,
- vocabulary differences are constantly changing, faster than pronunciation,
- syntactic differences not as easy to identify, especially in fast casual speech,
- phonetic/phonological phenomena clearly distinguish accents even for the untrained ear.



Causes of pronunciation differences:

– differences between sound inventories

- regular sound correspondences:

RP /ɒ/ vs GA /ɑ/ *lot, hot-dog, want, was, shot*

RP /ɔ:/ vs GA /ɑ/ *walk, talk, call, bought, saw*

RP /əʊ/ vs GA /oʊ/ *boat, road, know, snow, show*

- not so regular sound correspondences:

RP /ɑ:/ vs GA /æ/ *dance, can't, path, last*

RP [t], [t^h] vs GA [r] *better, matter, letter, ladder*

RP [æ] vs GA [ɛæ] *cat, stand, mad, hand*

(Balogné & Szentgyörgyi, 2006)



Causes of pronunciation differences:

– differences between rule applications

- R-dropping: *car*, *card*, *Harvard*
- Flapping: *better*, *matter*, *letter*
- Glottalization: *Scotland*, *cats*, *caps*, *cakes*,
- L-darkening: *fill*, *killed*, *light*, *live*
- Breaking: *beer*, *sure*, *clear*, *fire*
- Smoothing: *tired*, *tower*



www.athboston.org/projects/screenprinting/

harvard/thumbnail.jpg

(Balogné & Szentgyörgyi, 2006)





2. Stereotypes in the Hollywood film industry

"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."

(Bleichenbacher, 2008)





- Movies exploiting stereotypes on several levels:
 - stereotypical locations
 - stereotypical characters
 - *"Down-and-out Little Brother,*
 - *the Amusing Ethnic Guy,*
 - *the Tough, Bitchy Battleaxe Who Is Revealed To Be Warm-Hearted At The End, Coming To The Aid Of Our Less Experienced Heroine"*
(BBC on-line)
 - stereotypical language use





Stereotypical characters with an RP accent:

- German/Roman/Old Greek characters,
- the evil genius,
- the old sage, teacher, wise mentor
- fantasy characters in general(?)

SOME RULES OF ACCENTS

English RP is similar to Roman

Bad Germans are played by Germans

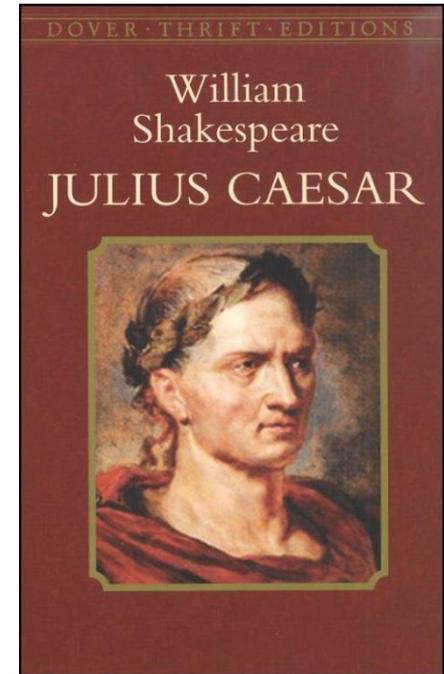
Brits must play Americans well

Sean Connery does not do accents



The roots of the stereotypes:

- *German/Roman/Greek characters*
 - to sound foreign and exotic enough,
 - British accents are used to suggest a sense of antiquity,
 - inspired by some of Shakespeare's plays set in Rome,
 - this led to the birth of The Queen's Latin trope



<http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/TheQueensLatin>

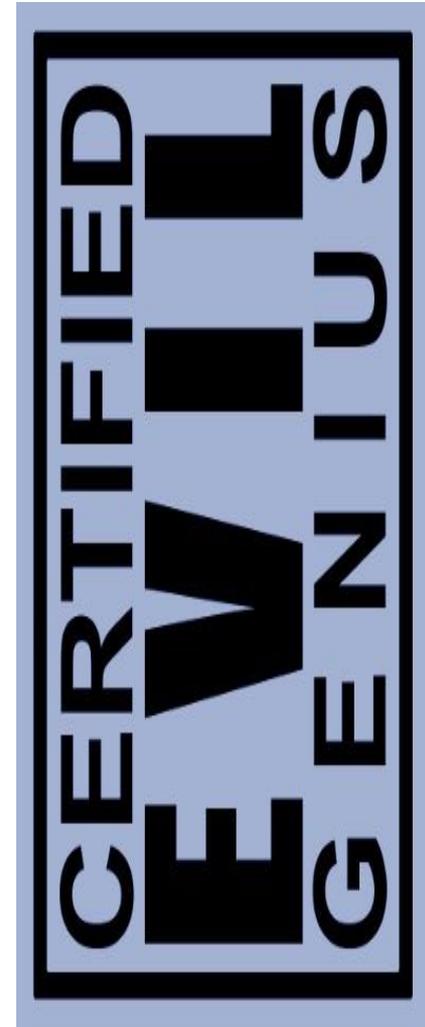




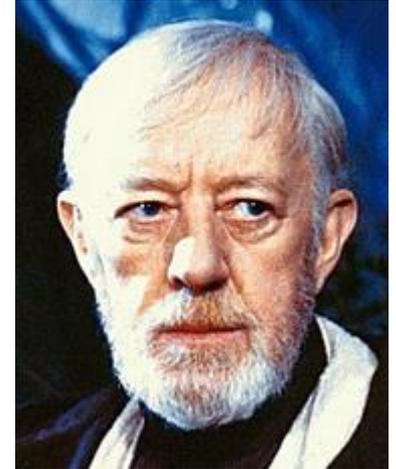
– *the villain, the evil genius*

- probably a combination of legends of gentlemanly criminals and the American perception of English RP accent,
- the less altered speech of the East Coast stood out of rough talk of the Wild West,
- general impression of Great Britain as the 'Old World': a place of tradition, schooling and nobility,
- the concept of the British as the 'old masters' and British influence as an unjust yoke,
- thus, even though many Americans don't know what RP is, it sounds smart/high class to them.

http://h2g2.com/edited_entry/A891155



- the old sage, teacher, wise mentor
 - British upper classes,
 - prestigious British schools with a typical accent,
- fantasy characters in general(?)
 - fantasy lands tend to have customs based on medieval (European/English) customs,
 - Tolkien's *Hobbit/Lord of the Rings* trilogy is based in many ways on Old and Middle English language and society,
 - War of the Roses-type war and its North-South division nicely reflected in British accents (cf. *Game of Thrones*) – i.e. not only Standard British!



- Examples:

- in Errol Flynn's *Robin Hood* and in Kevin Costner's *Prince of Thieves* the protagonist (good guy) had an American accent while the sheriff of Nottingham spoke British English.



- Star Wars, an interesting mixture of two traditions:
 - officers of the Empire's stormtroopers all sound quite British;
 - Luke Skywalker and Han Solo, the über-American space cowboy both had American accents





- Luke
 - rhotic: *I'll never turn to the dark side*
 - /ɑ/ instead of /ɔ:/ and /ɒ/ in *your thoughts, the conflict*
- Emperor
 - non-rhotic: *power, dark side*
 - /ɔ:/ instead of /ɑ/ in *Skywalker*



– Darth Vader (James Earl Jones) had an American accent even though he was apparently the worst of the bad guys.

- Jones got the job late when shooting the film and merely overdubbed the lines of the original British actor playing Darth Vader.
- Vader is redeemed at the end of *The Return of the Jedi*, and imperial officers were not.



- Sir Alec Guinness plays Obi-wan Kenobi in RP English – a remnant of the old order, a mentor guiding the young hero in line with the stereotypes.



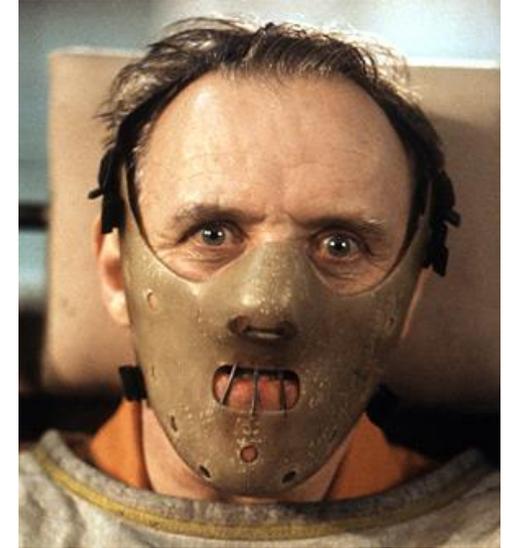


"As mentioned above, the connotations of the accent come from centuries of anti-imperialistic fashionable thought. Even so, modern Americans don't necessarily associate modern Britons with the big, bad Empire of yesteryear. It's the accent that's seen as evil, not the nationality. It has become merely a stereotypical way of indicating the bad guy, a job once done by white and black cowboy hats" (BBC)



- Examples:

- Alan Rickman in *Die Hard* (English actor playing a Germanic character with a slight accent), *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*;
- Anthony Hopkins in *The Silence of the Lambs*.
- Basil Rathbone in *Anna Karenina*, *David Copperfield*, *Son of Frankenstein* and *The Mark of Zorro*;
- Ben Kingsley in *Sneakers*;





Die Hard

- Alan Rickman (Hans Gruber (German)):
 - non-rhotic: *hard*, *work*, *New York*, *detonators*
 - No Yod-dropping: *NewYork*, *tune*
 - /ɑ:/ instead of /æ/: *can't*, *class*
- Bruce Willis (John McClaine):
 - rhotic: *New York*, *detonators*
 - flap: *gotta do*,
 - Yod dropping: *NewYork*, *stupid*
 - /æ/ instead of /ɑ:/: *can't*, *laugh*



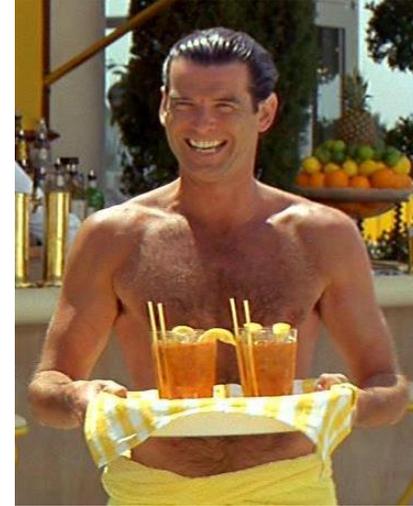
- Examples:

- David Bowie in *Labyrinth* and *The Last Temptation of Christ* (all non-Roman biblical characters are played by Americans);
- Jeremy Irons in *Die Hard With a Vengeance* (where again, it's an English actor playing a German character), *The Lion King*;



- Examples:

- Pierce Brosnan in *Mrs Doubtfire*;
- Sir Ian McKellen in *X-Men*;
- Timothy Dalton in *The Shadow*
- John Lithgow in *Cliffhanger* and *Shrek* (American actor doing British accent)





X-men

- Ian McKellen (Magneto)
 - non-rhotic: *heard*, *mark*, *brotherhood*,
 - /ɒ/ instead of /ɑ/: *brotherhood*, *hot*, *want*
 - no flapping: *out of*, *at all*, *little*, *get it out*
 - /ɑ:/ instead of /æ/: *can't*, *path*





- Conclusion

- RP is often used to indicate

- otherness in space/time – German/Roman/Greek characters,
- teachers, mentors, sages,
- an evil genius,
- fantasy characters

with its typical characteristic features (R-dropping, lack of Yod-dropping and flapping, distinctive vowel qualities);

- had its historical and sociological sources which are not relevant any more;
- instead, it became a self-fulfilling prophecy: generations have grown up hearing it in films and it became an icon of the above.





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Thank you for your attention!





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