

Michaela Hulínová

PhDr. Kateřina Tomková, Ph.D.

AJ22066: Pronunciation Varieties of English

13 October 2014

British Villains and the Use of RP in American Films

Just the other day I came across a relatively new Jaguar commercial from January 2014 called “British Villains ‘Rendezvous’.” It depicts an array of famous English actors reciting a list of characteristics that make British villains so unforgettable, while the slogan of the campaign says: “have you ever wondered why in Hollywood movies, all the villains are played by Brits?” The authors of the commercial certainly have a few ideas about it, ranging from “we are more precise” to “stiff upper lip is key” (Jaguar USA). However, I have to admit, they got me wondering, too. In film, television and other audiovisual media, the emphasis is placed on the spoken word as much as on the visuals. Therefore it seems only natural to assume that there is a reason behind this and that perhaps Received Pronunciation truly sounds more evil than General American or that it simply sounds foreign and exotic to American ears. After all, the general consensus among the American casting directors seems to be that the more posh the villains sound, the more evil they are.

The sound of a very distinguished male British voice describing the latest evil master plan in a flawless RP accent is not new in the American film industry. The trend of casting British or foreign actors as villains in films goes back to the beginnings of cinematography in the United States. According to an article posted on the BBC News website called “Why Villains in Movies Have English Accents,” “in the early days of cinema, Hollywood stars were American, while character actors came from everywhere else. Your American star carried

the film, and never played a villain because it might have tarnished their image. . . Any US actor wanting to be a star someday might avoid the villainous role, whereas British character actors have always been more flexible.” Regardless of traditions imprinted in the minds of film enthusiasts, every accent has certain connotations. In his article “Accent of Evil,” Geoff Lindsey calls RP “the accent of the British empire’s ruling elite,” and claims that “RP was from its very conception the accent of privilege.” Therefore, to a casual American moviegoer, RP seems to implicate old-fashionedness, haughtiness, expensive education, vast intellect, impeccable manners and, in many cases, evilness.

Probably the biggest culprit in this regard is the Walt Disney Studios. The Disney animated films brought to the big screen a great number of British baddies, such as Jafar from *Aladdin* (1992) – although he is voiced by an American actor doing a rather questionable, and occasionally too rhotic, British accent – and Shere Khan from *The Jungle Book* (1967) with his cultured English accent and demeanor to match. But the best example is perhaps *The Lion King* (1994) in which, rather inexplicably, Scar, the evil uncle voiced by Jeremy Irons, is the only lion in the animal kingdom who speaks like a born Englishman while his own brother, King Mufasa, has what could only be described as a very standard General American accent. Indeed, in many Hollywood films, RP equals evil and a character’s morality can be easily judged from whether or not they pronounce /r/ before a consonant. In fact, it has become such a stereotype that the moment a character opens their mouth to say something for the first time can spoil the ending of the film. Today, Disney films seem to be slowly passing down the tradition of evil British masterminds to comic book adaptations – *The Avengers* (2012), *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012) and science fiction films – the original *Star Wars* films, *Star Trek into Darkness* (2013).

To conclude, the perceived “evilness” of British accent is not based on prosodic features – rhythm, stress or intonation. It does not *sound* more sinister. Instead, RP accent owes its reputation to the popular imagination. And the agreement among linguists and casual viewers alike seems to be that British villains are the most terrifying because they will kill you, *of course*, but they will sound extremely polite and sophisticated while doing it.

Works Cited:

- 1) Lindsey, Geoff. "Accent of Evil." *English Speech Services*. English Speech Services, 4 June 2014. Web. 13 Oct. 2014. <<http://englishspeechservices.com/blog/accent-of-evil/>>
- 2) Jaguar USA. "Jaguar 2014 Big Game Commercial | British Villains 'Rendezvous' | Jaguar USA." Online Video Clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 28 Jan. 2014. Web. 13 Oct. 2014. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Bls1KKDwmo>>
- 3) "Why Villains in Movies Have English Accents." *BBC News*. BBC News, 15 Jan. 2003. Web. 13 Oct. 2014. <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/dna/place-lancashire/plain/A891155>>