EVIL BRITS AGAINST THE WORLD – RP AS AN EVIL ACCENT

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Abstract: *The paper is an overview of an oft cited claim that evil genius characters in Hollywood movies are identified by their having a Standard British English accent. After an overview of the main accent features of Received Pronunciation, the possible origins of the stereotype are presented followed by a demonstration of the accent in the speech of the Emperor in the* Star Wars *saga.*

Key words: *accent, dialect, Received Pronunciation, General American, movie characters, evil genius, stereotypes*

Introduction

This paper looks at the possibly most straightforward and noticeable aspect of natural spoken languages, their spoken form, the characteristic properties they are associated with, and how they influence viewers' attitudes to movie characters who have a particular kind of pronunciation or accent. First, we are going to introduce the most important basic notions of the field followed by an introduction to the typical characteristic features of Standard British English (RP). The following section will focus on the stereotypical characters that most often have RP accents in Hollywood movies, more particularly, on evil characters that speak RP.

This research has been motivated by the upsurge in linguistically naïve public opinion heard and read about both in friends' and students' circles as well as on-line forums, blogs, and articles in scientific journals. All these point in the same direction, i.e., that there are a number of stereotypical movie character types that most often have RP accents even if played by an American actress or actor. Some of these seem well motivated at first sight while others often seem quite far-fetched and more complicated to understand. The paper focuses on one particular such character type, that of the evil genius, and investigates the sources of the stereotype and the linguistic features that are most often associated with it by taking a look at a number of examples from well-known Hollywood movies.

Basic notions

Whenever a human speaks any natural language they always speak it with certain characteristics that are typical for a speech community of some sort. Depending on exactly what kind of community this is we will call the variety idiolect, regional dialect, sociolect, jargon, argot, or slang. The characteristics may also vary according to what level or module of the language they involve: the pronunciation, the vocabulary and morphology, the syntax, or the semantics of the language.

Our research can be narrowed down from the point of view of both factors discussed above: on the one hand, we will be concerned with regional and/or social dialects of English, more precisely RP English; on the other hand, we will only focus on pronunciation, which even the linguistically untrained layperson will relatively easily identify.

Sociolinguistic discourse distinguishes between dialects and accents on the basis of the latter only involving differences in pronunciation as opposed to the former involving differences at all levels of the language (for references see Holmes, 2013) and sources cited therein). Since the focus of our attention is the pronunciation of movie characters, we may just as well stop here but RP English is also interesting from the point of view of exactly what kind of variety it is whose pronunciation we are going to examine.

RP English – where RP stands for Received Pronunciation, received='accepted' – is originally a regional dialect that was spoken in the South-East of England, mostly the area in and around in London; it soon became a sociolect, i.e., a dialect characteristic of certain social groups, in this case: the upper class. As a result, it is also referred to as a prestige dialect. Today, we may consider it an absolutely placeless sociolect not associated with any particular region of Britain.

> The point is, however, that it is not possible to ascribe any geographical origins to a genuine native RP speaker other than that they are almost certainly British, and probably English. This peculiar lack of regionality must be due to a peculiar set of sociolinguistic preconditions, and has in fact often been ascribed to its origin in British residential, and therefore also non-regional, schools for the children of the upper-classes, the so-called Public Schools. (Trudgill, 2001)

To sum up, we are going to focus on the pronunciation feature of a (prestige) sociolect – originating in a regional dialect – without any regional features whatsoever. The only identifiable regional property of this accent is that it is British – and maybe that it is English as opposed to Welsh, Scottish or Irish. This is going to be important

as the context in which we are going to use RP as a reference point is almost exclusively American, i.e. Hollywood movies.

Trademark RP pronunciation features

After identifying the variety at hand, let us now turn to those pronunciation features that are most often listed as trademarks of an RP accent – note, however, that it is only this particular combination of the features below that make someone sound like an RP speaker, but not any one of these features in itself. Many of these characteristics are found in a number of varieties of English worldwide. It is their combination, their co-occurrence in a bundle that identifies someone as an RP speaker. The features below are discussed in most textbooks on the phonetics of English (e.g.: Balogné Bérces & Szentgyörgyi, 2006; Carr, 1999; Giegerich, 1992; Kreidler, 1989; Nádasdy, 2006; Roach, 200; Wells, 1982; and Gimson, 1980 to name just a few). For the sake of simplicity we are going to limit our discussion to segmental characteristics – while they also display great inter-dialectal differences, suprasegmentals are outside the scope of this paper.

Consonants

As far as consonant sounds are concerned, we can identify rhoticity, the presence or absence of the phoneme /r/ in pronunciation in certain positions, L-darkening, the (non-)velarized quality of /l/ in certain positions, flapping, the quick voiced pronunciation of /t/ and /d/ in intervocalic positions vs. a non-flapped, possibly slightly aspirated pronunciation of /t/ in the same positions as the crucial, most easily identifiable differences between RP and most of the American English varieties.

Rhoticity

If we wish to name the consonantal feature that is the most significant, we can surely claim that it is the non-rhoticity of RP that any English speaker, linguist or layperson, would identify, i.e., the fact that RP speakers always drop their r's whenever they are not followed by a vowel – or to put it in a different way, when the /r/ is followed by a consonant sound or by a pause.[1]

[1] Of course, the particular site of R-dropping can also be described by making reference to positions within the syllable, i.e., r's are to be dropped only when in the coda of a syllable. For the exact description of the rule, see Balogné Bérces & Szentgyörgyi (2006) or any of the references mentioned above.

(1) R-dropping – the data[2]

/r/ prononuced before a vowel	/r/ dropped	
	before a consonant	before a pause
carrot	*card*	*car##*
starring	*starred*	*star##*
star is	*star was*	*bar##*

As the data in (1) shows, whenever a vowel follows the /r/ in question within the same morpheme, as in *carrot*, or within the same word but in a different morpheme as in *starr+ing*, or in the following word, as in *star is*, the /r/ is always pronounced. On the other hand, whenever a consonant sound follows as in the second column in (1), regardless of whether it is in the same morpheme, in a different morpheme in the same word, or in a different word immediately following, it is always silent. Also, it is always silent when utterance final as in the data in the third column.

On the basis of this we expect differences between General American (GA) and RP in the environments of the second and third columns where RP speakers will have no [r] while GA speakers will always pronounce one.

This well-known phenomenon characterizes other dialects besides RP: in Britain, most of the Southern dialects are non-rhotic and the more we proceed to the North, the more rhotic dialects we will find – i.e., varieties that have a pronounced /r/ in all positions regardless of the phonological environment. As for the U.S., it is widely known that most varieties spoken on the East Coast and in the Southern U.S. are just like RP, i.e., non-rhotic. New York City shows a lot of variation as pointed out by Labov (1966) and Mather (2012/12). The other varieties of North American English including General American or Standard American English are all rhotic, however. As a result, it is easy to see that RP and GA differ significantly from each other in this respect, which makes rhoticity an ideal reference point.

L-darkening

The next consonantal difference we are going to consider is the pronunciation of the phoneme /l/ in different contexts. While in American English varieties including GA it is mostly pronounced as more or less velarized, a so-called dark-L − [ɬ] as far as its symbol in the International Phonetic Alphabet is concerned −, in RP English it shows absolutely rule-governed variation depending on the phonological environment: before

[2] The symbol + will be used to indicate a morpheme boundary, # will be used to indicate a word boundary, while ## will be used to indicate an utterance boundary, i.e., a longer period of pause when no speech sound is immediately following.

vowels or the glide /j/ it is pronounced as a plain, non-velarized, so-called clear [l] while in other environments, i.e., before any other consonant and before a pause, it is pronounced as a dark, velarized [ɬ]. Also, it is pronounced as dark if it is syllabic, i.e., it occurs in a syllable completely lacking vowels, e.g., *people* [ˈpʰiːpɬ], *modelling* [ˈmɒdɬɪŋ].

(2) L-darkening – the data

Clear [l] before a vowel or /j/	Dark [ɬ]	
	before a consonant other than /j/	before a pause
Italian *filling* *fill it*	*build* *filled* *fill that*	*fill* *tell* *call*

As is clear from (2), similarly to R-dropping, L-darkening also applies across word boundaries as well as within words. Where we might expect differences between GA and RP is in the environments in the first column where we expect only clear [l]'s in RP but more or less dark [ɬ]'s in GA.

Presence vs absence of obligatory flapping

While RP and GA behave identically concerning strongly and weakly aspirated voiceless plosives, they differ in cases of no or variable aspiration at least in the case of the phoneme /t/. Most typically, this concerns intervocalic positions before an unstressed vowel word medially and before stressed or unstressed vowels alike across word boundaries. While RP speakers tend to have weakly aspirated or plain unaspirated voiceless /t/'s in such positions, GA speakers always replace their /t/'s with a flap [ɾ].

(3) Flapping – the data

intervocalic within a word before an unstressed vowel	intervocalic word finally	
	before an initial unstressed vowel	before an initial stressed vowel
better *matter* *letter*	*get around* *write about* *thought ahead*	*get up* *write off* *sort out*

According to the literature (Trudgill, 2001), in the first group of data RP speakers tend to pronounce either plain unaspirated stops or they slightly aspirate the /t/, the latter being representative of conservative RP speakers. GA speakers will pronounce the same words with flaps almost exclusively, just as they do with basically all the words in the second and third sets. RP speakers − especially less conservative, casual RP speakers − will sometimes allow for a third variant in the second and third environment types: besides plain [t] and slightly aspirated [t^h], a flap [ɾ] may also be possible as an option. Note, however, that a flap is never obligatory for even casual RP speakers in any of the environments.

After reviewing the major consonantal differences we wish to use for the basis of accent identification, let us now turn to vowels and see how they differ in the two accents described.

Vowels

As far as vowel sounds are concerned, we will focus on three major differences between RP and GA. Two of these apply everywhere across the board, while the third one only applies in a certain set of words and there is also some vacillation. The vowels involved are the back low rounded vowel /ɒ/, the diphthong /əʊ/, and the long back low unrounded vowel /ɑː/.

The back low rounded vowel /ɒ/

As far as this vowel of RP is concerned, the situation is much simpler than in the cases of the consonantal phenomena discussed above. While there is always a rule applying in some environments but not in others that will create a difference between RP and GA consonants, in the case of the vowel /ɒ/ there is a simple and exceptionless rule: wherever an /ɒ/ is pronounced in RP English, GA speakers will always have the vowel /ɑ/ instead, i.e., the back low rounded vowel is replaced with a back low unrounded one.

As a result of this difference the following words have slightly different pronunciations in the two varieties: *hot* RP /hɒt/ vs GA /hɑt/, *want* RP /wɒnt/ vs GA /wɑnt/, and *brotherhood* /ˈbrɒðəhʊd/ vs /ˈbrɑðɚhʊd/.

Apparently, this is not a difference caused by the application of a different (allophonic) rule of these varieties but rather a difference lying in the phoneme system of the two accents: RP has a back low rounded vowel phoneme while GA has a back low unrounded vowel phoneme instead.

The closing backing diphthong /əʊ/

The situation is quite similar in the case of the phoneme /əʊ/: RP speakers start this diphthong with a central mid unrounded vowel, i.e., a schwa /ə/ and then move the tongue to the position where a back half-close rounded vowel /ʊ/ is articulated. The majority of GA speakers, on the other hand, start this diphthong with a back mid rounded /o/ and then move to the same position where the /ʊ/ is articulated. This applies everywhere; so, yet again, this is not a difference based in rule application but rather a difference between the phoneme systems of the two varieties.

As a result, speakers of the two varieties will have different pronunciations in words like *wrote* RP /rəʊt/ vs GA /roʊt/, *go* RP /gəʊ/ vs GA /goʊ/, and *won't* RP /wəʊnt/ vs GA /woʊnt/.

The back low unrounded vowel /ɑː/

The case of the back low unrounded /ɑː/ is somewhat different from the other two vowels discussed above. The correspondence between RP low back unrounded /ɑː/ and GA low front unrounded /æ/ does not apply to all words; instead, we have a number of environments where the distinction holds.

(4) /ɑː/ vs /æ/ in RP and GA (Balogné Bérces & Szentgyörgyi, 2006)

ASK-words		*CALM-words*
before voiceless fricatives	before a nasal + a consonant	before a silent l + a labial consonant
ask *fast* *path*	*dance* *trans* *can't*	*calf* *half* *almond*

In the so-called ASK-words, i.e., in the environments described in the first two columns of (4), the majority of RP speakers pronounce a back low unrounded vowel /ɑː/ while the vast majority of GA speakers pronounce a front low unrounded /æ/ in the very same type of words without exception. On the basis of this one might be tempted to claim that, similarly to the two subsections on vowels above, we have simple phoneme correspondence at hand, i.e., the phoneme system of RP has a back low unrounded vowel as opposed to GA having a front low unrounded vowel. However, this is clearly not the case. On the one hand, it is only in these environments where we can find a contrast between the two vowels in the two dialects. In other positions they will have the same vowel phonemes: in words like bar, car, star, far both dialects will have a back low unrounded /ɑː/ while in words like that, man, stand, hand both will

have a front low unrounded /æ/3. That is, both dialects have both vowels. On the other hand, in CALM-words, i.e., the third environment type in (4) there are only some words that will display this asymmetry between RP and GA (see the examples in the chart) while others will be pronounced with the same vowel phoneme in both varieties, e.g.: palm, calm.

Having discussed the most important segmental phonetic-phonological differences between RP and GA, let us now turn to the question of how these differences are reflected in stereotypical movie characters' speech in Hollywood movies.

Stereotypical Hollywood movie characters with an RP accent

A character's speech in a movie can heavily influence the viewer's attitude to the character. As Bleichenbacher notes

> [d]ifferent 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)

We have to note that this is not only the case when a movie character has a foreign accent or speaks in a dialect characterized by traits of language contact with a language other than English but also in cases when the character, or rather the actor/actress, speaks with a native regional/social accent. In the discussion below, we will present one of the most widespread stereotypes, which is most often displayed with the help of an RP accent: the evil genius.

The source of the stereotype

The source of the stereotype of an evil genius or villain probably goes back a very long time in history and it probably is a combination of the legends of gentlemanly criminals and the way Americans in the Wild West perceived the RP accent and the similar American accents spoken on the East Coast (h2g2, 2003/2011). It is very likely that the dialects spoken along the East Coast resembling Standard British English in many ways – being non-rhotic, having similar vowels, etc. – stood out among the non-coastal dialects spoken along the frontier, i.e., they were easily identified as an "other" way of speaking the same language. Also, Britain was typically identified as the Old

[3] Note that the exact phonetic realizations of these vowel phonemes may significantly differ between the two dialects (and others) but the low vs. front distinction will hold.

World associated with a place of long traditions, quality education and good schools – at least for the lucky few – and, most of all, class and nobility as opposed to the U.S. as the representative of the New World without any set traditions, no prestigious schools yet, and, most of all, a place where class did not matter, where anyone could make a fortune: the place where anyone could live the American Dream. Added to this was the identification of the Brits as the old masters of America having too strong an influence on the New World, which was trying to get rid of this yoke. All in all, we have an accent that is easily understandable for speakers of American English, yet it is also associated with the above mentioned attitudes: the result is a perfect combination of things to be looked up to and detested at the same time. Moreover, it was something easily identifiable for speakers of American English. Thus, even though most Americans do not know what exactly are the characteristics of a British/RP accent, it sounded and still sounds high class and smart to them.

To sum up the discussion above, we may claim that

> 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 or the glow of a cigarette in a dark alley. (h2g2, 2003/ 2011)

Having seen the possible reasons for the formation of the stereotype of the RP speaking villain, let us now turn to some actual examples where this principle is applied.

Movies with RP speaking evil geniuses

In this section we will present examples from a Hollywood blockbuster, or rather, one of its main characters that fits the description of an evil genius, and will point out some of the most significant pronunciation features that help members of the audience with identifying him as an RP speaker. The films under discussion include the original Star Wars-trilogy (Lucas, 1977; Lucas, 1980; Lucas, 1983), the 1990s adventure movie based on the original Robin Hood mythology (Reynolds, 1991) and a Marvel-comic adaptation of X-men to the big screen (Singer, 2000). We will present the Star Wars movies in a more detailed way only referring to characters in the other films briefly.

Star Wars

In the Star Wars universe, the ultimate evil genius is Emperor Palpatine, who rules the galaxy with the help of the dark side of the power. Logically, the Emperor is the character who must speak with an RP accent while members of the group of rebels fighting against him should all speak with an American accent. This is perfectly borne out in the examples below.

(5) *Star Wars* samples

	text	pronunciation	part of movie
(a)	*I can feel your anger*	/aɪ ˈfiːl jɔːr ˈæŋgə/	(Lucas, 1983) 1:39:56
(b)	*and your journey towards the dark side*	/jɔː ˈdʒɜːni təˈwɔːdz ðə ˈdɑːk ˈsaɪd/	(Lucas, 1983) 1:40:06
(c)	*your fleet is lost*	/jɔː ˈfliːt ɪz ˈlɒst/	(Lucas, 1983) 1:39:26
(d)	*let the hate flow*	/ˈlet ðə ˈheɪt ˈfləʊ/	(Lucas, 1983) 1:43:45
(e)	*your lack of vision*	/jɔː ˈlæk əv ˈvɪʒn/	(Lucas, 1983) 1:50:26
(f)	*young Skywalker*	/ˈjʌŋ ˈskaɪwɔːkə/	(Lucas, 1983) 1:50:48

As it can be seen in the examples above, the Emperor displays almost all of the RP features that we identified earlier: his /r/'s are dropped in anger in (5a), in journey, towards, and dark in (5b), in your in (5c) and (5e), and in Skywalker in (5f). As for his l's, they are clear before vowels and /j/ as in feel your in (5a), fleet and lost in (5b) and lack in (5e). He also aspirates his /t/ instead of flapping it in intervocalic position before an unstressed vowel in fleet is in (5c), where all American speakers would pronounce a flap. The Emperor's vowels are also indicators of an RP speaker: he pronounces a low back rounded /ɒ/ in lost in (5c) instead of unrounded American English /ɑ/.

Just to mention a few other characters displaying very similar pronunciation features, we can point out the sheriff of Nottingham in Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves (Reynolds, 1991), an evil character with an RP accent plotting against the hero, who speaks with an American accent, of course. Another example of the same kind can be found in the character of Magneto in X-Men (Singer, 2000), where Magneto also displays identical pronunciation features and is hence identifiable as an RP speaker. The reader is referred to The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy: Earth Edition (h2g2, 2003/2011.) for a list of other films with similar characters.

Conclusion

In this paper we have pointed out and argued for three claims: on the one hand, that RP is often used to indicate an evil genius with its typical characteristic features (R-dropping, a distinction between clear and dark L's, lack of flapping, and distinctive vowel qualities); that this stereotype had its historical and sociological roots which are not relevant any more; and that RP became a self-fulfilling prophecy: generations have grown up hearing it in films spoken by evil characters and thus it became an icon of villany.

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