Dialects and Linguistic Replacement: How Language Impacts Cultural and Social Perceptions

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A vast and enriching aspect of all national and global cultures is in the diversity of the thousands of languages spoken worldwide. Approximately 7,000 languages are estimated to be spoken today, not including the dozens of assorted sign languages that are utilized as well (Fromkin 372). The study of linguistics encompasses an extremely broad and ever-expanding view of how languages are structured and how they may be interpreted, based on highly detailed concepts including word meaning, context, form, and historical, social, and cultural influences. Language in society plays a significant role in how individuals perceive one another and themselves, so by studying linguistics, it is possible to gain an understanding of how and why those perceptions are formed. This paper will focus on several films, including *Hidden Figures, My Fair Lady*, and *The Sound of Music*, and how each film exhibits certain language approaches used to illustrate a societal construct, produce a sense of nationalism, or connect with the viewer in a realistic or a nonrealistic way. Important to this study as well are the concepts of phonetics, which is the study of speech sounds, and lexicon, which is the "mental dictionary" that includes all the words of a language (Fromkin 9). A study of the enriching aspects of regional dialects, social dialects, and linguistic replacement—with a focus on phonology and lexicon—creates an opportunity for the discovery of how language impacts culture from both local and universal perspectives.

There have long been stereotypes in society which imply that certain language dialects are suggestive of the intelligence or sophistication of the speaker. The "Southern drawl" has negative connotations suggesting its speakers to be "slow" or "uneducated," and while the New York or New Jersey dialect supposedly indicates the speaker to be rude and arrogant, the Cockney dialect of London has long carried "hard, dishonest, uneducated or comic connotations" that supposedly suggest the level of unsophistication and low class standing of the speaker (Berglund 2). Studies have shown that only certain "standard" dialects of British and American English are perceived to correlate with "competence and wisdom," while "nonstandard speech" often correlates with "stupidity and acts as comic relief" (Berglund 3). The Cockney dialect is especially considered to be among these "nonstandard" speeches.

Cultural identity is highly influenced by language, and even within the same language, different cultural identities may exist. English is spoken by billions of people—many Australians, Europeans, Canadians, and Americans speak it, for example—but in all those places, different dialects of that language are spoken. What is the significance of these dialects as they relate to societal or cultural perceptions and assumptions? How are dialects and other language aspects communicated and perceived in society, and how do they impact culture?

To answer the question of how certain language aspects, like dialects, influence society and culture, one must first define "dialect" and distinguish the different kinds of dialects. The way "dialect" is defined as a technical linguistic term often differs from how it is popularly

understood: "professional students of language typically use the term 'dialect' as a neutral label to refer to any variety of a language that is shared by a group of speakers" (Wolfram 2). From a technical standpoint, the term "dialect" does not hold any "social" or "evaluative" connotations that determine one speaker to be superior to another.

Realistically, however, common understandings of dialects do include consideration of social and cultural influences. These influences are sometimes difficult to pinpoint; Wolfram writes, "The particular social factors that correlate with dialect diversity may range from geographic location to complex notions of cultural identity" (2). With this differentiation in mind, the terms "regional dialect" and "social dialect" become relevant as well. If "dialect" refers to "mutually intelligible forms of a language that differ in systematics ways," then a "regional dialect" is "a language spoken that has its own character resulting from various linguistic differences accumulated in a geographic region." A "social dialect" includes "dialectal differences that seem to come about because of social factors" (Fromkin 269-77). These terms are not to be confused with "accent," which is a very commonly and loosely used term defined as "characteristics of speech that convey information about what sociolinguistic group to which a speaker belongs" (Fromkin 272). "Accent" typically refers purely to phonology—the sound system of a language—but "dialect" also refers to aspects of language other than phonology including grammar, lexicon, and manner of speaking (Fromkin 26).

An example of a regional dialect is the "Tidewater Southern" dialect, which exists under the branch term of "Older Southern American English" that encompasses several different dialects spoken throughout the southern United States (Schneider). Tidewater Southern was originally spoken primarily by white plantation owners until around the time of the American Civil War. At that time and in the subsequent decades, that dialect affected the speech of especially African-American nannies hired by wealthy white families, which suggests that dialects are influenced, not only by regional and social factors, but also by other characteristics such as race, gender, and socio-economic status (Schneider). The Tidewater Southern dialect is phonetically characterized by its non-rhotic feature, which means speakers commonly drop the [r] sound. Its other features include its "broad [a]" sound as heard in words like "cart," spelled phonetically as [k^{h}at] (allowing for dialectal differences), and its vowel-merging feature of the [I] and [ɛ] sounds (Todaka 1).

Contrasting from the Tidewater Southern dialect is the Cockney dialect; it is often identified as a social dialect and has long been associated specifically with the working class of London, England (Fowler 1). The word "Cockney" is notable for its lexical associations; its etymology originates from the Middle English term "cokeney," meaning "cock's egg," which likely referred to any small and odd or unusual object. Its meaning evolved into an insult or a form of ridicule, which is closely associated with the negative view held of Cockney dialect speakers by members of high English society. The word "cokeney" was even used in connection with the word "daffe," which refers to a "fool," in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* in his prologue to the "Reeve's Tale" (Fowler 1).

The Cockney dialect is highly distinguishable because of its unique phonetic and lexical characterizations. Phonetic attributes of the dialect include the swallowed [t] sound in words like "bottle" (phonetically spelled [bɔʔl], allowing for dialectal differences) and the dropping of the [h] sound in words like "his" or "have" (Fowler 5). Outside the mentioned phonological aspects of the dialect, there are plentiful lexical features of the dialect unique to Cockney when compared to other "standard" English dialects. Certain words and phrases that are used as slang terms may represent a unique Cockney lexicon; interesting examples include phrases such as "chew the rag," "kick the daisies," and "apples an' pears," respectively meaning "to have an argument," "to die," and "the upstairs" (Fowler 4-7). Charles Dickens and George Bernard Shaw—who once commented that America and Britain are "divided by a common language"—are two European writers whose interests notably included studying and replicating this dialect (Fowler 1).

Hidden Figures and *My Fair Lady* are two popular and respected films, each of which exhibit the regional and social dialects of Tidewater Southern and Cockney respectively. *Hidden Figures* is based on the true story of three African American women—Katherine Johnson, Mary Jackson, and Dorothy Vaughan—living in Virginia in the 1960's, each of them being brilliantly talented mathematicians and engineers. All of them are, reluctantly, hired by NASA to help develop the equipment and calculations needed for America to send its first man to space. Despite the discrimination they faced, that achievement made by those three historic women would be recognized as "a turning point in the competition between the United States and the Soviet Union in space," and also in the development of modern America and modern society (NASA).

The Tidewater Southern dialect is evident in *Hidden Figures* among each of the women, their families, and their community. The signature features of the dialect, specially the non-rhotic and vowel-merging characteristics, are present in all dialogue involving each of the women in the film (20ᵗʰ Century Studios). The lexicon present in this film is unique as well; because of the culture, profession, and social standing of each woman, the language present in the movie includes specialized terms involving the women's African-American ethnicity and their careers in higher mathematics. Terms referring to advanced mathematical computations and theories are common throughout the film. Clearly, the common presumption that speakers with Southern dialects—especially those of color—are "slow" or "uneducated" is false when that stereotype is meant to stand against the true story told in *Hidden Figures*. To suggest, for example, that Katherine Johnson was an inferior and uneducated individual based on her spoken dialect, not to mention her skin color, presents a highly flawed statement, considering her career accomplishments that impacted the nation and the world (NASA).

My Fair Lady is a 1964 film set in London, England that is based on the 1913 play *Pygmalion* by George Bernard Shaw and the musical of the same name by Alan Jay Lerner (Wernick). In the story, a phonetics professor, Henry Higgins, becomes convinced that he can transform a young, working-class, Cockney-speaking woman, Eliza, into a refined, cultured member of high English society by teaching her rules of etiquette and how to speak in an "upper

class" dialect. His remarks toward Eliza in her attempts to learn from him throughout the film are rather alarming from the perspective of an individual who holds respect for all languages and dialects. At one point in the film, Higgins tells Eliza as she struggles to read a rhyme in his preferred dialect, "You'd get much further with the Lord [in your prayers] if you learned not to offend his ears" (Loecsen 0:30). He also says at another time in the film, "What could possibly matter more than to take a human being and change her into a different human being by creating a new speech for her?" (CBS Home Entertainment 0:45). His disregard for the Cockney dialect is clear and vivid in these lines, and they act as antitheses to the points believed to have been intended by Shaw. In his original play, Shaw meant to communicate that dialects and different forms of languages are valuable; no attempt to improve someone by changing his or her speech should belittle them as people who are ultimately deserving of respect and kindness (Wernick).

Another interesting phenomenon present in movies and films that is reflective of the impact had on culture by language—and had on language by culture—is the concept of linguistic replacement (Bleichenbacher 180). This notion refers to the way that language is represented in fictional narratives of foreign origins, whether written or performed, and how the base language and culture of primary audiences affects the portrayal of the story. Lukas Bleichenbacher of the University of Zurich writes that linguistic replacement occurs when "the depicted story would realistically have taken place in a different linguistic setting [and] the language(s) are replaced by the base language of narration…[it is a] sacrifice of realism for the sake of comprehension" (180). An example of a film exhibiting linguistic replacement is *The Sound of Music*; the language that would naturally be spoken by the characters, German, is replaced with English to cater to the linguistic needs of audiences.

The Sound of Music, a popular film released in 1965 and based on the true story of the Maria von Trapp family, is about a young Austrian woman, Maria, who becomes employed as a governess for a family of seven children. She and their widowed father eventually fall in love, uniting the family amid the escalating unrest and turmoil of early 1940's Europe. Her new husband, a decorated naval officer, is ordered to accept a commission from the German navy, which he refuses. At the end of the movie, the family flees from Austria to escape potential German invaders. Considering the intended audience of the film to have been primarily English speakers, it is appropriate that realism would be sacrificed for the sake of comprehension, as Bleichenbacher states. Rather than having the characters speak German as would be appropriate for a family living in Austria, English is the primary language used.

Elimination, signalization, and evocation are three methods by which linguistic replacement occurs in fictional narratives, and each one has a notable effect on culture and language perception (Bleichenbacher 181). Appendix A visually demonstrates the differences between them, how they are used, and how they impact viewers. In *The Sound of Music*, elimination is a primary method of replacement used which involves the complete use of the base language—in this case, English—without any mention of the German language or even an accent that would logically be used in the film's setting. This method of replacement only allows viewers who utilize context clues and "extralinguistic" cues to determine that the base language

does not fit the setting of the narrative. Different from elimination in its improved acknowledgement of linguistic replacement, "signalization" occurs when the replaced language is directly mentioned or alluded to in the context of the narrative. "Evocation," the third method, is unique in its use of the base language with interference from the logical language; narratives utilizing evocation include characters who speak with accents, show bilingual tendencies, or demonstrate blatant code-switches (Bleichenbacher 180). To some degree, these methods are used in the twelve movies—the plots of which primarily involve international conflicts, terrorism, and global crime—exemplified in Appendix B (Bleichenbacher 182).

  The impact of language on culture in instances of linguistic replacement is clear: audiences are not exposed to the true nature of the characters in their natural settings when languages are replaced, which has the potential to alter the viewers' perceptions of the cultures being represented by those characters. Those settings and their subsequent languages involve communicating certain phonetic and lexical principles that often cannot be conveyed in the base language as effectively as in the original language. Therefore, there is a sense of authenticity lost when using linguistic replacement. Elimination and signalization may attempt to tell stories in an illogical base language, but in doing so, they raise the risk of causing audiences to misinterpret certain realities of the story. The use of evocation, while admirable in its desire to acknowledge the logical language, has a higher potential to damage the reputation of a language or a culture by misrepresenting it and its speakers: "It carries the risk of creating an association of second language use with specific and potentially unfavorable aims of characterization" (Bleichenbacher 194). If movies and written stories are to be shared with people who speak languages other than the one appropriate to the original narrative, it is unavoidable that linguistic replacement be used. It is important, however, to cautiously recognize the effects had on culture by language—and vice versa—to ensure that misrepresentations and false characterizations do not occur.

  This concept is exemplified in *The Sound of Music* as well. By not having the characters speak in what would be their native language, which is German, they may be perceived by audiences as being so far removed from Nazi Germany and the culture to which they belong that a disservice is done to the true story of the von Trapp family. Having the Austrian characters speak English unites them more with English-speaking audiences and allows viewers to identify with them more; however, that then increases the possibility of the true German culture being demonized, despite it never having identified or agreed with the horrors carried out by Nazi Germany, at least not in the time since the film was released. Forming an appropriate opinion when approaching this film is especially important because it is based on the story of a real family from Austria whose lives were different from the film industry's adaptation of what happened to them (Gearin). Their memory and the reputation of present-day German culture must not be demeaned by the characteristics of language used throughout the film to tell an Austrian story in English.

  By studying distinctive aspects of different languages, it is possible to understand how their individual characteristics developed and how they are presently perceived. With that in mind, one may then comprehend how the social stigmas and myths (Appendix C) that surround

certain languages or dialects—like the Tidewater Southern or Cockney dialects—have formed and whether they are appropriately linked to the speakers of those languages. Culture is also further impacted by certain language occurrences, such as linguistic replacement, which can directly alter an individual's view of the associated language or culture of a narrative.

Understanding these aspects of language which impact culture is vital to studying linguistics, but, beyond that, it is imperative to realize that those characteristics are influential and enriching to cultures worldwide. One could also argue that part of the purpose of dialects and even linguistic replacement is to effectively tell stories: they influence the authenticity and the admirability of characters and storylines, and they make for fascinating pieces of language that comprise the fabric of modern culture and society. Cultural relativism, which appreciates the richness of language diversity by not judging a culture based on the terms of one's own culture, is also highly relevant in a study of these linguistic and cultural ideas because it collectively suggests that no language or language speaker is superior to another (Lumen Learning).

The vastness of linguistics as a field of study is incredible. I have become captivated with the science of language, particularly with the way that it affects how people identify with their own cultures and how it affects their perceptions of others. Language is a fundamental, instinctive quality of humanity and society, and it is intriguing because it is ever-changing: Wolfram writes, "Language is a dynamic phenomenon, and the only static variety of language is, in reality, a dead one" (9). With renewed knowledge of the inconceivable variety of languages and dialects that exist, I have a new perspective and respect for people internationally whose way of life and view of the world is so directly and innately tied to their distinctive and complex methods of language communication.

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Appendix A

Table 1. A taxonomy of multilingualism in fictional texts, based on Mareš (2000a, 2000b, 2003).

	Most distant from depicted reality			Closest to depicted reality
Strategy	Elimination	Signalization	Evocation	Presence
Treatment of other languages	Neither used nor mentioned	Named by the narrator or by characters	Evoked by means of L2 interference phenomena	Used
Audience's awareness of other language(s)	Depends on ability to process extralinguistic hints	Through metalinguistic comments	Depends on correct interpretation of interference phenomena	Full
Audience's comprehension of content	Full	Full	Full, provided the audience is unwilling to listen to "non-native"[2]	None, unless the other language is somehow translated

(Bleichenbacher 181)

Appendix B

Movie	Year	Genre	Major other languages
Amadeus	1984	Historical drama	German, Italian, Latin
Clear and Present Danger	1994	Action thriller (Jack Ryan)	Spanish
GoldenEye	1995	Action thriller (James Bond)	Russian
Hannibal	2001	Action thriller	Italian
The Hunt for Red October	1990	Action thriller (Jack Ryan)	Russian
Licence to Kill	1989	Action thriller (James Bond)	Spanish
The Living Daylights	1987	Action thriller (James Bond)	Slovak, Russian, German, Afghani
The Pianist	2002	Historical drama	Polish, German
Schindler's List	1993	Historical drama	German, Polish, Hebrew, Yiddish
Tomorrow Never Dies	1997	Action thriller (James Bond)	German, Chinese
A View to a Kill	1985	Action thriller (James Bond)	French, German
The World Is Not Enough	1999	Action thriller (James Bond)	Russian

(Bleichenbacher 182)

Appendix C

The following excerpt contains "myths" and "realities" involving dialects from the 2015 textbook *American English: Dialects and Variation* by Walt Wolfram and Natalie Schilling. This excerpt divulges some of the most common perceptions of language and dialects versus the realities of those dialect occurrences.

Myth: A dialect is something that *someone else* speaks.
Reality: Everyone who speaks a language speaks some dialect of the language; it is not possible to speak a language without speaking a dialect of the language. Some dialects get much more attention than others, but this social recognition is unrelated to dialect status.

Myth: Dialects result from unsuccessful attempts to speak the "correct" form of a language.
Reality: Dialect speakers acquire their language by adopting the speech patterns of those around them, not by failing in their attempts to adopt mainstream language features. Dialects, like all language systems, are systematic and regular; socially disfavored dialects can be described with the same kind of linguistic precision as social favored, prestigious language varieties; they are not a "collection of mistakes."

Myth: Dialects in the United States are receding due to the influence of the mass media and population mobility.
Reality: Dialects are dynamic; while some once-isolated dialects are receding, others are intensifying and diversifying. For example, some island dialects on the Eastern coast of the United States are fading away, while others are becoming more distinctive. In addition, new dialects are developing on the West Coast, for example in California, Oregon, and Washington. Further, major United States dialect divisions, especially that between the North and the South, are getting deeper, with the dialects becoming more rather than less different from one another.

Myth: Speaking a dialect limits a person's ability to express precise ideas and abstract constructs.
Reality: All language systems enable the expression of precision, complexity, abstractions, and artistry (Wolfram 9-10).

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