

Some Observations on British Accent Stereotypes in Hollywood-Style Films¹

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7.1 Introduction

This chapter looks at the use of British accents in US television and cinema productions and asks how important it is to take this factor into account in audiovisual translation, following Voellmer & Zabalbeascoa's 2014 study of the presence of German in US film productions. Translating has often been said to involve a deep or special kind of reading. It brings out an awareness of textual features that may be less apparent when there is no requirement to render them in a new version for text users with different linguistic and sociocultural profiles. Thus, any discussion, such as this one, on the perception of certain combinations of language variation can be influenced, and most likely enriched, by translational considerations. For native English speakers, any code-switching or change of accent from British English (BRE) to American English (USE) is usually fairly easy to notice, and the discussion for film lovers may revolve around when BRE accents are used in US films and whether American actors and actresses can do good BRE accents. But when the need arises to consider these phenomena as translation problems, then a different approach must be taken, focusing primarily on "how is and how can BRE (best) be dealt with in the audiovisual translation of US film and television?" If this is the case, then there is a distinction to be drawn between justifying the use and quality of BRE in US productions (and vice versa) for film reviews and analyses, as opposed to the relevance of language variation for the case of BRE varieties vs USE varieties to be considered when dubbing or subtitling into Spanish, for instance (Zabalbeascoa and Corrius 2012).

1. in D. Montini, I. Ranzato (eds.) 2021, *The Dialects of British English in Fictional Texts*. Routledge.

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If for a moment we leave aside texts that have no verbal elements (e.g., wordless novels, cartoons, some silent films, pictorial assembly instructions, or the textual communicative quality of the visual arts) then one feature of any text is that it has a main language. The notion of main language(s) of a text seems better suited to the field of translation than an oversimplified idea that texts are essentially monolingual. Just as multimodality is also a more adequate baseline approach than the oral vs written binary division for the case of audiovisual translation, and, increasingly, other modes of translation. From the reception perspective of interlingual translation, the main language is always the intended target language (L2), regardless of the precise nature of the main language (L1) of the source text. For example, for the case of Spanish-language audiences, it does not matter whether a film (as source text, ST) is in English of one variety or another, it will necessarily be a case of L1-English translated into L2-Spanish. So, from the perspective of translating into Spanish or Italian, etc. it does not matter whether a film is mostly in USE from California, Texas, Boston, New York, Mid-Atlantic, or BRE from London, Birmingham, Manchester, Cardiff, or Glasgow. The fact that the L2-Spanish of the dubbed or subtitled version is Iberian, Mexican, Mid-Atlantic Spanish, or Neutral depends on the target text (TT) audience's language profile, not the ST version. It does matter, however, when the audiovisual text is interpreted as having a relevant combination of different types of English (dialects, sociolects, or idiolects), in terms of stylistic variation, ideological intent, cultural diversity, humour, topic, narrative technique, use of stereotypes, character portrayal, etc.

A historical perspective of the evolution of English-language cinema and television, mostly in the United States, may help to understand why certain linguistic trends prevail at certain times in US audiovisuals, such as the development from Mid-Atlantic or Transatlantic accents to selective uses of BRE accents in US productions as Mid-Atlantic waned. These factors and changes are highly revealing towards a better understanding of traditional American film practices and trends but may have little bearing on how US audiovisuals are translated today. What is relevant to any translator's task at hand, and only when carefully considered, is the deliberate use of language variation, such as US English opposed to other languages that might be scripted into the film. If the main language of the ST can be referred to as L1 and the main language of any of its translations as L2, then any other language, in either ST or TT can be labelled L3, ST (for the purpose of this chapter) being the US audiovisual production and TT its foreign-language dubbed or subtitled version. Linguistic variation can be annotated as L1+L3 for the source text, and L2+L3 for the translation (TT). The focal point of this chapter, then, is to discuss L3-BRE combined with L1-USE in a given film or TV series, and how this particular combination is and can be rendered in audiovisual translation, if at all, when deemed relevant.

British English, and in particular Received Pronunciation (RP), has had a special status in American film making for many years. There are many diverse factors that help to explain this. The first obvious reason is that BRE and USE are historical branches from the same original language tree. Secondly, there has been a constant (one-sided) migration of actors and actresses from the UK towards the USA (just to name a few: Cary Grant, Patrick Stewart, Ian McShane, Emily Blunt, Christian Bale, Keira Knightly, Naomi Watts, Jason Statham). Thirdly, Hollywood has always been interested in foreign markets, including the English-speaking countries of the former British Empire, and British productions also strive to be appealing to US audiences, in different degrees. Mid-Atlantic, or Transatlantic accent is a constructed way of speaking, especially developed for twentieth century film making, as part of an effort to produce a prestigious version of USE, with numerous features of RP included in the mix, that no American actually spoke unless specifically trained to. It was adopted in the early twentieth century mostly by US “aristocrats” and Hollywood actors (Fletcher 2013). More recently, “Mid-Atlantic accent” can also refer to any accent with a perceived mixture of both USE and BRE varieties.

In a historical development after WWII, with the United States appearing as the new superpower (empire), Hollywood moved away from a standard practice of using Mid-Atlantic accent towards an acceptance of a more local General American English (Queen 2015). A new purpose was found for Mid-Atlantic, BRE, or pseudo-British accents, restricting the use of this accent to characters belonging to ruling classes of empires, spanning from ancient Egypt and Rome to the Galactic Empires of the Star Wars franchise, or fantasy worlds (Lord Farquaad in *Shrek*, as opposed to Princess Fiona’s General American in the same film). In any case, the development was to use BRE accents in Hollywood productions more and more like foreign languages, namely, to create, evoke, or reinforce certain stereotypes and stock characters, or some form of narrative tension. And this is where it becomes relevant to translation, to the extent that translators may be interested in rendering, or at least dealing somehow with, stock characters (Ranzato 2018, 2019), stereotypes, clichés, discourse communities, and character portrayal and style, as well as an awareness of prefabricated orality (Baños and Chaume 2009) and how this type of orality plays out in audiovisual fiction in source texts, or in “dubbese,” or in stylistic features and the norms of subtitling.

When we are dealing, then, with (the translation of) late twentieth century and early twenty-first century audiovisuals, we are no longer as interested in early film history as in the variability of factors that account for British accents in Hollywood-style productions. In this respect, casting is something to be considered. Is the performers’ mother tongue some form of BRE or did they live in Britain? Has the performer been coached in accents, and how good is the resulting command of an acquired accent?

Have the performers been cast because of or despite their elocutionary, articulatory attributes and native dialect? Is a British accent an essential requirement of the script?

7.2 Observations on Particular Samples

Anthony Hopkins's accent, playing Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), is an interesting case in point. Actually, pinpointing his accent in this film is no straightforward matter. It seems somewhat Mid-Atlantic, in the sense that it is a cross between fake British and fake American. The character is meant to be from Baltimore but bears no resemblance to the characters in *The Wire* (2002–08). The situation is saved somewhat by the character having spent time abroad in Lithuania and France, and there is no mention of him ever having been near the UK despite occasional features of BRE in his speech. To complicate matters further, Lecter is capable of imitating South US American English, and despite this, many viewers and critics put the peculiar accent down to the fact that the actor, Anthony Hopkins, is Welsh and not good at accents. If this were so, he quickly fixed that shortcoming to do an excellent American accent in *Nixon* (1995). *The Silence of the Lambs* is a psychological horror film, and it is not far-fetched to venture that the film director, Jonathan Deeme, raised no objections to a British twang in Lecter's diction, even though there is no connection to the British Isles anywhere. This incongruity in particular, and this case in general, seem to lend credence to the idea that British accents are often associated with villains and evil characters, and they do not get any more psychopathic than Hannibal Lecter.

Another example, reinforcing the same idea from a different angle, is Hugh Laurie playing Dr House in *House M.D.* (2004–12). Like Hopkins, Laurie is British born, but unlike Hannibal Lecter, Dr House speaks with what is clearly meant to be a distinct USE accent. Despite his flaws, House is perceived as a hero, doing much good and saving many lives. The point here is that there does not seem to be anything in the premise of House's fictional biography and character that would have prevented the character from having a British heritage. So, it does not matter that House and Lecter have no particular linguistic quirk in their dubbed or subtitled versions broadcast in Spain. It does not seem reasonable to demand that the translator become fixated on somehow rendering the accents in productions like these two, unless there is some special interest in providing a colourful or exotic-sounding variety as a form of highlighting character portrayal or adding suspense. In any case, I think such cases do shed some light on Hollywood scripting and casting practices and policies regarding the potential and actual relationships between real-life performers' linguistic backgrounds and the roles they play.

A screenwriter may wish to distinguish two character groups (Zabalbeascoa and Corrius 2012), depending on whom they can identify with: the in-group characters and the out-group. In-group membership is partly due to coming from the same country as the audience, and it is frequent practice for Hollywood out-group characters to be from other countries (Bleichenbacher 2008). Out-group membership and cultural otherness are features that can potentially account for the presence and use of L3. Dialect variations like British English can indeed show cultural otherness, often just as well as more dissimilar foreign languages. Di Giovanni (2003, 208) refers to cultural otherness as “the depiction of cultures which are distant in space or even in time from the familiar cultural background.”

A further example can be found in Jeremy Irons’s filmography and some of the roles he is best known for, including his work as a voice actor in animated films, constantly called upon to display his archetypically RP accent, almost inextricably connected to evil villains. The highly suspicious, dissolute European aristocrat Claus von Bülow in *Reversal of Fortune* (1990), the evil Scar in *The Lion King* (1994), and the equally evil Jafar in *Aladdin* (1992), Simon Gruber in *Die Hard with a Vengeance* (1995), and the evil wizard Profion in the film *Dungeons and Dragons* (2000).

Example 7.1 Aladdin

JAFAR You ... are late.

GAZEEM A thousand apologies, O patient one.

JAFAR You have it, then?

GAZEEM I had to slit a few throats to get it. (Jafar reaches out for it, but Gazeem yanks it back.) Ah, ah, ahhh! The treasure!

JAFAR Trust me, my pungent friend. You’ll get what’s coming to you.

Just as we might say that Jeremy Irons epitomises British English – posh RP in particular, defined as a popular stereotype of the British upper-class and aristocracy – at the service of portraying evil, we might equally claim that actors like Hugh Grant (*Mickey Blue Eyes* 1999, or Charles in Example 7.2) and Colin Firth (*Love Actually* 2003) whose RP tends to be used to signal an American stereotype of British men as stuck-up, self-conscious prudes, wimps who can sometimes be forgiven in part because they can also be seen as more endearing than macho types. Diction and word usage are of paramount importance in character portrayal both in the source text and any of its translations. Butlers are frequently derided, and for the American stereotype, they must be British, just as Geoffrey

is in *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*. The Spanish dubbed version of this show compensates for a total lack of British accent by making his speech somewhat effeminate, thereby developing the opposite-to-jock American stereotype of Englishmen.

In Example 7.2, Hugh Grant plays wimpish Charles, and the point for translation is that the joke in the dialogue hinges quite a bit on the fact that Matthew is not English, but Scottish. However, the Spanish audience have no way of knowing this at this point in the film because his Scottishness is only manifested in his accent. Example 7.6 is quite similar to Example 7.2 in relying entirely on a character's accent and nothing else (in the ST) to "tell" the audience where a character is from, often as a crucial ingredient of humour or some other aspect of the script.

Example 7.2 Four Weddings and a Funeral

MATTHEW She's a pretty girl. The one you can't take your eyes off.

Is it love at first sight?

CHARLES Good Lord, no! It's the bloke she's dancing with. I played rugby with him at school. I'm wondering what position he played.

Though, let's say, for the sake of argument, one did take a fancy to someone at a wedding. Do you think there really are people who can say "Hi, babe. My name's Charles. This is your lucky night"?

MATTHEW Well, if there are, they're not English.

CHARLES Quite.

Apart from casting constraints or priorities, and the portrayal of evil villains or endearing wimps, two additional factors to be considered are foreignness and comprehensibility. Foreign characters can easily stand out by speaking foreign languages (i.e., L3), in a device called vehicular matching, as proposed by Sternberg (1981). Depending on the reason why a foreign out-group character is introduced in the story, the next consideration is whether or not the character's utterances are meant to be understood by (a) other characters, or (b) the audience, or (c) comprehension is not really the issue, but rather highlighting some metalingual aspect of the dialogue. If the need to understand is important or irrelevant, then a dialect or different standard serves exactly the same purpose as a "more foreign" language, with the added advantage of being comprehensible. In this respect British English (BRE) in American films works rather similarly to non-native utterances, let's say English spoken imperfectly with a French accent and typical instances of interference from the character's native French language, including tell-tale uses of words and

register, etc. A case in point is the Merovingian character in *The Matrix Reloaded*, “cursing in French is like wiping your arse with silk” (2003). There are two noteworthy points in the Merovingian line. One is that his French accent is quite randomly chosen for the script (i.e., he could have been posh British or Russian, etc.) given that there is hardly any mention of geographical locations in the script, set as it is in a virtual world. The other is that the observation the character makes about cursing in French is ironically probably only true from the perspective of certain native speakers of English and other non-French communities.

On the other hand, for dramatic or comic purposes, BRE might be the director’s choice when looking for a language that is impossible or hard to understand by other characters or by the audience, as in Example 7.3, appealing possibly to both US and British audiences even if the US audience is closer to Avi’s viewpoint than the British.

Some films are not “purely” British or American, but are either coproductions, or are carefully produced to appeal to British and American audiences, for example, in the cast. This is the case of *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (casting Andie McDowell) and *Snatch* (developing ideas not used in *Lock Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*, a more genuinely British production with no US characters), casting Brad Pitt, Benicio del Toro, and Dennis Farina (as Avi; see Example 7.3).

Example 7.3 Snatch

TONY Where was he last seen?

DOUG At a bookies.

TONY Bookies? [to Susi] Pass us the blower, Susi. [to Avi] Bookies got blagged last night.

AVI “Blagged”? Speak English to me, Tony. I thought this country spawned the fucking language, and so far nobody seems to speak it.

TONY [explains] Blagged, robbed.

DUBBED VERSION IN SPANISH:

TONY Anoche fangaron una casa de apuestas.

AVI ¿Fangaron? Háblame en cristiano, Tony. Los ingleses tenéis fama de ser finolis y habláis fatal. Hablar bien no cuesta una puta mierda.

SPANISH SUBTITLES:

TONY Una fue chorizada anoche.

AVI ¿Chorizada? Este país es cuna del inglés y nadie parece hablarlo.

In this example, Tony and his Cockney gang do not fall neatly into the same evil category as Hannibal Lecter, Jafar, or Scar (although they are not exactly nice); it is rather a US-UK rivalry dynamic whereby each side of the Atlantic often accuses the other of speaking a poor version of the English language. In the Spanish versions of this scene there is no L1-L3 opposition that would warrant such a metalinguistic comment, but this is compensated for by Avi saying that he cannot understand Tony's slang or vulgar expressions to refer to robbery (*fangaron*, an infrequent colloquialism in the dubbed version), and that Tony should speak better to fit in with the image Avi had of Englishmen all speaking posh, in the dubbed version. The subtitled version is somewhat incoherent as the word used is actual Spanish slang for robbed (*chorizaron*), but the comment Avi makes is about England being the birthplace of the English language, and the connection is hard to make for any Spanish viewer reading the subtitles. The translator for the dubbed version, however, seems to have picked up on the requirement to introduce a joke at this point, and does so rather creatively, and more coherently than the subtitles, by saying that "to talk properly is not at all fucking hard." The dubbed version also manages to throw in another humorous quip in the form of *háblame en cristiano*, a common expression in Spanish which means "talk to me in a way that I can understand and follow you," therefore quite fitting for this context, and bypasses the tricky dilemma of making an explicit reference to either Spanish or English.

One of *Snatch*'s most memorable features is Brad Pitt in the role of an Irish Traveller. He introduces himself by saying "Call me Mickey. Not Irish, not English." His speech is repeatedly portrayed as incomprehensible to all of those around him except the group who travel and live with him.

The rivalry theme between the USA and the UK is illustrated in Examples 7.4 and 7.5. In Example 7.5, it seems that this rivalry can be talked about at least among the characters, even if it cannot be reflected in Spanish by any accent. Example 7.4 is taken from a scene involving what might be regarded as a case of Charles's love at first sight for Carrie; he is caught gazing in her direction by Fiona, who teases him by exploiting his shyness and inability to share his feelings. The stereotype of British acute sense of embarrassment is almost a theme of the film and is personified in Charles. In Example 7.4, the UK-US rivalry is also there but the important element to be kept in translation could be the fact that everything Fiona says about Carrie is teasingly meant to put Charles off Carrie, first by pointing out Carrie's negative traits, and when that does not work, by saying that Carrie is too good for Charlie, not worried in the least about this apparently blatant contradiction. A good joke in the script, then. In this analysis Fiona's utterance of the word "American" is meant as an insult, partly achieved through voice pitch and facial expression, and I think a foreign audience would appreciate that insulting effect in their translated version, even if Carrie's American accent could not be rendered.

Example 7.4 Four Weddings and a Funeral

Fiona and Charles look across at Carrie who is listening considerably to a grandmother.

FIONA Name's Carrie.

CHARLES Pretty.

FIONA American.

CHARLES Interesting.

FIONA Slut.

CHARLES Really?

FIONA Used to work at Vogue. Lives in America now: only goes out with very glamorous people: out of your league.

CHARLES That's a relief.

An aspect that makes the exchange in Example 7.4 so effective is the staccato rhythm of single-word turns. A Spanish translation that provides fuller sentences with verbs, for example spoils the effect somewhat, as "she's American" sounds like volunteering information, unlike "American" carefully uttered to sound disgusted.

Example 7.5 A Fish Called Wanda

OTTO You English, you think you're so superior, don't you? Well, you're the filth of the planet. A bunch of pompous, badly dressed, poverty-stricken, sexually-repressed football hooligans. [aiming a gun at him] Goodbye, Archie.

ARCHIE At least we're not irretrievably vulgar. You know your problem? You don't like winners.

OTTO Winners?

ARCHIE Yeah. Winners. Winners like... North Vietnam?

OTTO Shut up! We did not lose Vietnam! It was a tie!

ARCHIE [in a fake American accent] I'm tellin' ya, they kicked some ass there. Boy, they whupped your hide real good!

OTTO No, they didn't.

ARCHIE Yes, they did.

OTTO Oh, no, they didn't.

ARCHIE Oh, yes, they did.

OTTO Oh, no, they... Shut up! Goodbye, Archie.

ARCHIE Gonna shoot me?

OTTO Er, yes. [in a fake British accent] Yes, 'fraid so, old chap. Sorry!

Example 7.6 Pulp Fiction

PUMPKIN I'm not saying I wanna rob banks. I'm just illustrating that if we did it'd be easier than what we've been doing.

HONEY BUNNY And no more licor stores?

PUMPKIN What've we been talking about? Yeah no more licor stores. Besides, it ain't the giggle it used to be. Too many foreigners own licor stores. Vietnamese, Koreans. They don't even speak fucking English. You tell 'em "empty out the register," they don't know what you're fucking talking about. They make it too personal. We keep on, one of these gook fuckers, gonna make us kill 'im.

The humorous irony in Example 7.6 relies on the fact that Pumpkin sounds foreign, i.e., he has a British accent. If and when his accent is "lost in translation," as indeed is the case in the Spanish dubbed version, the irony and the humour are lost with it if no compensatory techniques are resorted to. This character does not look foreign in any way so his foreignness comes entirely from his accent. A problem probably shared by dubbing practices in Spain and in Italy, as Bonsignori points out:

We can conclude that, although the various strategies for compensation in Italian dubbing may appear quite efficient in conveying diastatic and diaphasic variation to some extent, they are less convincing for expressing diatopic variation and the values that are attached to it.

(Bonsignori 2009)

Could Family Guy's Stewie (Example 7.7) be a caricature or parody of Hollywood's abuse of their stereotypes of the British, especially the "evil alien" one? This stereotype often combines with that of English people or characters being verbally more convoluted and using high registers quite incongruently. Stewie's BRE seems based on a combo of Hannibal Lecter, as played by Anthony Hopkins, and the vilest characters played by Jeremy Irons, with the added evil feature of being evil from the word go, from birth, in a jestful jab hinting that it is some sort of British DNA. So, if you're born evil in America then you must be British, or at least speak with a British accent, even if nobody else in your family was ever near the British Isles. This sociolinguistic bizarreness is the common denominator of Family Guy, Aladdin, and The Lion King (at least), where the person (or animal) speaking in British English has no good (sociolinguistic) reason to speak British English. Jafar is an

Arab and his henchmen and other minor Arab characters all speak nonnative English with Arabic accents. The heroes, Aladdin and Jasmine, speak with General American accents, and Jasmine's father, who is an old fuddy duddy, speaks with a British accent a-la-wimp. In *The Lion King*, matters are very similar to Aladdin but slightly more egregious because we are dealing with animals ... in Africa. In both of these Disney films, despite an array of different US accents and non-native English voices, the upper-class RP is always reserved for the worst villain. Stewie, then, follows in this incongruous tradition, which strongly challenges frequent claims to linguistic authenticity when foreign languages and dialects are used in audiovisual fiction, and goes one-up on it by using a one-year-old character. Mercifully, so bizarre is the premise that it can be interpreted as a parody of Hollywood's British-speaking villains, or should we say xenophobia in the light of examples like Dexter in *Dexter's Laboratory* (Cartoon Network 1996–2003), like Stewie in so many ways, except that his accent is more Eastern European, in a typical Hollywood stereotype of scientists (e.g., the grown-up scientist in *The Hudsucker Proxy* 1994).

Example 7.7 Family Guy S01E03 “Chitty Chitty Death Bang”

STEWIE I say, am I to spend the entire day wallowing around in my own feces? A little service here!

STEWIE Dear Diary... It seems the domestic overseers are plotting against me. ... Their plans somehow relate to the anniversary of my escape from the womb. ... I'm still haunted by the memories of how I was incarcerated... in that amniotic Attica. [Epic instrumental music] ... As I recall, it was every potential man for himself. [Whooshing] ... I alone had reached the target objective, thanks to the intrepidity... I developed at testicular boot camp. But it was a trap! ... I was imprisoned in that uterine gulag for nine grueling months. ... Day 171. I've sprouted another finger, counting the one from yesterday. I'm up to 11. ... As the months of solitude passed, I began to go insane. ... It seemed my prison cell was getting smaller and smaller. ... I was quite sure that soon I would be dead. ... But then, a miracle! There was a light at the end of the tunnel. ... I rushed to freedom, but suddenly I was ambushed by a mysterious man in white! ... The man in white. Of course. He must be the hired professional of whom they spoke. He failed to thwart my escape into the outside world. And now, one year hence, he's returning to rectify his mistake and... put me back in the womb!

The character of Stewie touches on different topics and issues that might be assigned to taboo or offensive humour. All the more so as it involves a one-year-old child. There is no particular accent in either of the Spanish dubbed versions, for Spain, or for South America.

In Example 7.8, Sydney shows Irving (her partner in crime) at one point in the film how she can take on a fake identity as a British aristocrat as an effective means of doing their stings. And that goes on for a large part of the film, but suddenly there is a key moment when she feels she cannot keep faking her identity because the ploy is interfering with her relationship with Richie. As she gets more deeply involved with Richie, something clicks inside her and she drops her British accent. To the extent that this key turn of events is not reflected in a dubbed or subtitled version is to omit an essential element of the film's plot more than character portrayal. This feature of disguise being switched on at one point of the film and then turned off at another must stay or be compensated for somehow, simply so the audience can follow when Sydney is in disguise as Lady Edith, and, crucially, when she is letting her mask slip away, thus revealing her true identity to the police officer who is trying to entrap her and Irving.

Example 7.8 American Hustle

Sydney extends her hand to Irving in a royal fashion.

SYDNEY [British accent] Would you like to meet Lady Edith Greensly? [Irving looks stunned.] I have royal banking connections in London. I'd love to help you with your loan but of course I have to be very selective.

IRVING That was fucking fantastic.

SYDNEY Thank you. Did you like it?

BUSINESSMAN [falling for the British accent] Lady, your ladyship, thank you again.

IRVING [off screen] These are the roles that we were meant to play.

SYDNEY We are going to need another move, trust me. And you're going to be thanking me. [shifts to British accent] The key to people is what they believe and what they want to believe and I want to believe that we were real, and I want to believe that a man could want me. And I'm gonna take all of that heartbreak, and all of that sorrow, and I am going to use it. And I'm going to make Richie think that I want him, and that I like him, and I'm going to be very convincing. And I'm pissed at you.

RICHIE [still believing Sydney to be Lady Edith] I love you. I love you. Look at me. I'm in love with you. It is real now. I just said it so now's the time.

EDITH [kissing him] You want the truth? You want real?
RICHIE I'm ready for real.
SYDNEY [drops her British accent] OK, this is real. Do you hear my voice? This is real. This is real. What you hear is real.
RICHIE What?
SYDNEY This is me.
RICHIE What do you mean? What are you doing, an accent? An American accent?
EDITH No. There is no English. There's only American. There is no English.
RICHIE [confused and flustered] What are you talking about? Stop it. You're Edith. You're Edith Greensly. I checked your records.
SYDNEY I falsified my records back to birth. I falsified them. My name is Sydney Prosser, and I'm from Albuquerque, New Mexico. I'm not Edith Greensly. There is no Edith Greensly.
RICHIE You're freaking me out. No, you said in the stall that we were going to be real and that we weren't going to fake it.
SYDNEY I'm being real now. This is who I am. I'm Sydney Prosser. Ok?
RICHIE So, why did you do an English accent after that?
SYDNEY I'm sorry I didn't tell you in the stall. I created Edith because I needed her to survive, okay? But I'm done with that now.

Nothing particular is conveyed in the manner of speech in the dubbed version for Spain (entitled *La gran estafa americana*), that is, there is nothing different in Sydney's Spanish from the Spanish spoken by the characters she interacts with, like Richie and Irving, nor in her voice or accent nor is there any apparent attempt to include a particular compensatory idiolect. However, the Spanish version of these utterances could have involved the use of a completely different language, under the guise of non-native speaker of (US) English. Lady Edith's disguise consists of being European with connections to big bankers. The Spanish version could have plausibly made her disguise a central or eastern European aristocratic non-native speaker of TT Spanish in lieu of ST English, and it could have worked just as well as BRE did for the audiences in the USA, just as the somewhat randomly chosen French worked for *The Matrix Reloaded*.

The television series *Community* is more recent than the other examples, and goes much more out of its way to convey political correctness than, say, the Disney films of the 1990s, and in direct opposition to *Family Guy*. In this respect, the fact that Duncan is English does not lean so heavily on one sort of stereotype or another, and Duncan's character

Example 7.9 Community S01E01 “Community”

WINGER [referring to Duncan] I’m just using regular psychology on a spineless British twit.

DUNCAN I’m a professor. You can’t talk to me that way.

WINGER A six-year-old girl could talk to you that way.

DUNCAN Yes, because that would be adorable.

WINGER No, because you’re a five-year-old girl and there’s a pecking order.

DUNCAN Fine! I’ll do it!

WINGER Thank you.

DUNCAN Yeah. Pleasure.

portrayal can come across, as nearly every other main character in the series, as being a sample of some ethnic minority or foreign group and having other shortcomings which are more to do with personal background or psychological issues. From this angle, if the Spanish version does not reflect Duncan’s Englishness then very little is really lost. Duncan’s wardrobe and general demeanour could also be ambiguously interpreted as either a hallmark of Britishness or an individual quirkiness. This was my point in commenting on House M.D. In this respect, Dr House and Professor Duncan are both played by English actors and have very particular personal traits that do not necessarily have much to do with where they are from. So, it stands out that in one series the character should be British and not in the other. And in both cases, there is not a trace of ethnicity in the Spanish versions.

7.3 Concluding Remarks

What I have attempted to show above is that US English(es) and British English(es) used in opposition to each other in audiovisual fiction, as combinations of L1 and L3 in the same source text, present similarities and differences with traditional problems of dialects and multilingualism in fiction when they are to be rendered in translation. Of course, British English is not a dialect of US English, or vice versa, certainly not in the way African-American English, Baltimorese, or Texan Southern are. Nor is British English a straightforward case of a foreign language in the United States, as French or German are. However, BRE is foreign in the USA in the sense that its speakers are associated with a foreign country (UK), but it also has a dialectal flavour in the linguistic traits of its pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. Also, the UK and the USA have a special relationship and particular history with many episodes. For the purpose of audiovisual translation, then, it is important to get a

full grasp of what the BRE–USE opposition is in aid of the nuts and bolts of the screenplay, the cast, the semiotics, the cultural elements, and all the other factors that come into play in audiovisual production and reception (Delabastita 2010).

Sometimes, in translation, it seems impossible to reflect how some characters speak with a particular accent. In some of these cases it may not matter (*The Silence of the Lambs* and *Community*), or may be compensated for (*Family Guy*), and in other cases it may even be regarded as a good thing (e.g., omitting the xenophobic overtones in *Aladdin* and in *The Lion King* that Spanish children would otherwise have to grow up with). Then there are times when language variation is a key element (Corrius and Zabalbeascoa 2011) of character portrayal (*Four Weddings and a Funeral*) or humorous effect (*Pulp Fiction*) or plot development (*American Hustle*). In the case of language variation there still remains the question, for the translator, as to whether any kind of language can substitute the ST combination of BRE and USE, or if it has to be British, and if so how can that be conveyed in subtitles or dubbing. Explicit attribution (Sternberg 1981) – saying that the character is from Britain – is one way. Another way is to compensate for a virtual impossibility of conveying the idea through British accent by compensating through style, register, and discourse, and this is actually what happens so often in Spanish audiovisual translation. For the particular case of dubbing, especially when the comic intent is really obvious, funny voices can be resorted to, or noticeable changes in pitch, intonation, volume, tempo, or voice type can and are used as well (e.g., Buzz Killington in *Family Guy*).

Another factor to consider is to what degree the character is flat, and has no depth, changes, or inner conflict, or whether the character is meant to be round and more complex, and, of course, what role does Britishness play in that complexity, if any. We have seen, for example, certain recurrent patterns in Hollywood-style audiovisuals, some so recurrent as to cast the same actors as much as possible in different films just to make the stereotype easier to grasp immediately. Basically, there is the evil villain, often compounded with aspects of immorality, or psychopathy, combined with conceit and superior intelligence or education (usually wasted in futile or evil projects). Then there is the reverse image of the American hero: the British wimp, nerd, or endearing cutie. Thirdly, we may find instances of BRE simply to signal the funny foreigner, who acts or speaks oddly, in the same mixed bag as foreigners from many other strange lands with weird habits, manners, and tastes, some hilarious, others creepy, and some terrifying.

The norm in Spanish audiovisual translation is either not to distinguish (linguistically, especially in pronunciation) between the main language of a film and any others, or to leave the L3 untouched, and in the case of BRE the first of these strategies is extremely frequent, and the latter is seen as impossible or implausible. Clearly these trends are not effective

when BRE has an important function to play. In all of the examples shown above, the translator who seems most resourceful is the one who did the translation for the dubbed version of *Snatch* (Example 7.3).

I have not been able to find any examples where BRE as L3 in an American ST is changed to a different language (French, German) even though this strategy is occasionally resorted to in Spanish dubbed versions when the L3 is any language other than English. I personally think that this type of solution might work, or be worth considering at least, when BRE serves a very particular purpose that has nothing to do with UK–US rivalries, or when UK–US relations can be adapted or changed for the benefit of comic effect or important twists in the plot, which is the case, in my mind, of Lady Edith in *American Hustle*.

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