

# Linguicism in Hollywood movies? Representations of, and audience reactions to multilingualism in mainstream movie dialogues

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## *Abstract*

*Hollywood movies have been a prime site for the representation of intercultural and multilingual encounters for decades. As such, they are not only of interest to everyday cinemagoers or home viewers, but have increasingly attracted the attention of scholars from various disciplines, including sociolinguistics. A main focus of much previous work, such as Shohat & Stam (1994), Lippi-Green (1997) and Berg (2002), has been on issues of misrepresentation and negative stereotyping of characters constructed as the 'Other', such as speakers of non-standard Englishes, or indeed languages other than English. This has raised the question of the extent to which the English-language cinematic mainstream embodies the fictional counterpart of real-life linguistic discrimination, or linguicism. In this article, I present and exemplify three different quantitative and qualitative approaches to the study of mono- versus multilingualism in movie dialogues. These include an account of language choice patterns in a corpus of multilingual Hollywood movies, an analysis of metalinguistic content proffered by movie characters in the dialogues, and the reactions of movie viewers to these phenomena in an online message board. While the insights gained from the first two approaches do point towards patterns of linguicism, this is not generally the case for the audience reactions, which tend to be more favourable towards a rich and balanced depiction of multilingual phenomena in movie dialogues.*

*Keywords: multilingualism; movie dialogues; language ideology; linguicism; metalinguistic discourse*

## **1. Introduction: What is linguicism, and how can we pinpoint it in movies?**

The concept of linguicism, which has been in use in sociolinguistics for more than two decades, was introduced in the critical work of Tove

Skutnabb-Kangas and Robert Phillipson in applied linguistics, specifically their analysis of language acquisition planning for English as a second or foreign language in different contexts worldwide (Skutnabb-Kangas 1988; Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson 1995). Linguicism is defined by Phillipson (1992: 47) as ‘ideologies, structures and practices which are used to legitimate, effectuate, and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources (both material and immaterial) between groups which are defined on the basis of language’. According to Phillipson, this takes place when certain languages, in particular languages other than English, are characterised as ‘[l]ocalized’, ‘([i]ntra-) national’, ‘of narrower communication’, ‘[u]nhelpful’, ‘[i]ncomplete’, ‘[c]onfining’, ‘[c]losed’, and ‘[b]iased’ (1992: 282). Subsequent commentators have disagreed with the two scholars’ research agenda for various reasons; in particular, they have been criticised for overestimating the contribution of the (mainly British and American) language planners to the worldwide spread of English (see, for instance, Spolsky 2004: 86–88). The concept of linguicism itself, however, has caused less controversy. In much critical sociolinguistic work, discourses that display bias against specific language varieties are considered no less questionable than racist or sexist ones, in that they result in unfair stereotyping against and exclusion of people on the basis of their linguistic background (Bauman & Briggs 2003; Blackledge 2005). More generally, such discourses undermine, by virtue of the monolingual ideologies they transport, any meaningful language acquisition planning effort aimed at integrating pluriculturalism and plurilingualism. For this reason, researchers have offered rich insights into how these discourses (or their alternatives) inform language ideological debates in political, educational or other contexts (see, for instance, Lippi-Green 1997; Blommaert ed. 1999; Kroskrity 2000).

Phillipson has repeatedly characterised the Hollywood cinema as one of many factors that contribute to the ‘linguistic imperialism’ that is justified by linguicist discourse (Phillipson 2007: 83, 257) and has even called for ‘[m]easures ... to counteract Hollywood dominance on the screen, so that cinemas and TV companies diversify culturally and linguistically in ways that promote exposure to a range of European cultures and languages’ (Phillipson 2003: 181). While Phillipson’s work is mainly concerned with non-fictional contexts, both his overall framework and his discourse-analytic approach are useful for a sociolinguistic study of movie dialogues themselves for a number of reasons. First, film dialogues can be considered, just like school curricula, as a result of a language planning process, enacted by agents such as the production company, the director and screenwriter, actors, dialogue coaches and audiovisual translators. These agents’ decisions on questions such as the storyline, setting, location of photography, casting of actors, or length

of dialogue all influence the movie dialogue on the screen, and the characterisation of monolingual or multilingual individuals that the viewer gets as a result of production.

Secondly, movie dialogues are interesting and relevant texts for analysis in their own right, in that they reflect and transport prevalent ideologies, including linguistic ones (see, for instance, Blommaert 1999: 10) – much like the examples from literary texts, public statements and policy documents discussed by Phillipson. If linguisticism pervades the English-language film industry, movie characters can be expected, for instance, to comment negatively on the use of languages other than English, while proffering their enthusiasm about the English language. Thirdly, rather than being static end products of a clearly delimited artistic process, movie dialogues are cultural texts that are watched, discussed, reinterpreted and rewritten, in different forms, by members of the audience (see Androutsopoulos 2007), most prominently so in internet platforms. If successful movies perpetuate linguisticist discourses, these are likely to be reflected in audience reactions to the movies in question.

It is these three aspects (amongst others) that a sociolinguistic analysis of movie dialogues should take into consideration. Accordingly, the focus in this paper is on possible sources of linguisticist ideologies in three areas, discussed in the following three sections: the movie's portrayal of multilingual language use, the metalinguistic content of movie dialogues, and the metalinguistic discourse of members of the movie audience in an online discussion forum. While a quantitative approach is used for the first areas (section 2), content and discourse analysis inform the mainly qualitative approach in the latter two areas. In the conclusion, I discuss an opposition between both implicit and explicit linguisticist patterns in the movies themselves, and the more pluralist and heteroglossic discourse that is apparent in the audience contributions.

## **2. Multilingual language use in the movies**

In this section, I review and comment on the results of a study in which I combined different quantitative and qualitative approaches towards the representation of multilingualism in Hollywood dialogues (see Bleichenbacher 2008). On the one hand, I set out to discuss to what extent basic aspects of characterisation (e.g. narrative evaluation, or whether somebody is a 'good' or 'bad guy') are related to the linguistic repertoires of movie characters (speakers with English or different first languages, who are depicted as monolinguals or as people who use more than one language). In this domain, movies pervaded by linguisticist ideologies can be expected to portray speakers of languages other than English as more negative, and also to downplay the use of languages other

than English. A second focus was the depiction of language use itself, in particular the amount of dialogue (counted in speaker turns) in languages other than English, and the representation of code-switching by movie characters. Here, a linguistic representation would feature an absolute limitation, if not erasure (Irvine & Gal 2000), of non-English dialogue altogether, as well a distorted representation of code-switching or similar phenomena of multilingual discourse.

For the study, a corpus was compiled of 28 recent (1984–2003) English-language movies (listed in Appendix 1) that are widely known, commercially successful and set in multilingual contexts. Most of the movies can be assigned to the category of ‘Hollywood movies’ in a narrow sense, and all, including the few mainly European productions, represent mainstream English-language cinema. The movies feature reasonably realistic storylines that ‘naturally’ result in situations of language contact of different kinds, in that people travel or migrate to different countries, for instance as participants in an armed conflict, secret agents, work migrants, or casual tourists. The settings are predominantly European and North American, and the languages considered are, apart from English, major European languages such as French, German, Spanish and Russian. In Phillipson’s (1992: 99) wording, ‘it is the big languages that interest’ me, rather than endangered minority languages. Since these other languages are all powerful pluricentric languages (see Clyne 1992), they might be expected to escape linguistic discourses to begin with – which, however, is far from the case.

The genres include historical dramas, World War II films, different thrillers and action movies, and a number of comedies. Twelve of these movies, which all feature the *replacement* of other languages with English in scenes where English could not logically have been spoken, were analysed with qualitative discourse analytic methods. The remaining 16 movies all contain a certain amount of dialogue in languages other than English. The latter movies were subjected to a quantitative analysis, including an assessment of the amount of dialogue in different languages, and the interrelation of movie characters’ linguistic profiles and aspects of their characterisation. For this analysis, all 587 scenes from the 16 movies which contained dialogue in languages other than English, or featured characters with a non-English background, were coded for a number of narrative features (such as the setting, the activity, or the mood of the scene), as well as linguistic ones, specifically the patterns of language choice (English, another language, both, etc.). Furthermore, every character with a speaking role in these scenes (516 in total) was coded for demographic (e.g. sex, age, profession), linguistic (first language, other languages spoken) and narrative features (role in movie, positive or negative character, etc.). Several results of the quantitative

analysis can indeed be interpreted as instances of linguicism in Hollywood movies, a first point in case being the relationship between characterisation and linguistic repertoires. Table 1 shows the interrelation of positive, negative, mixed and unclear (neutral/very minor) characters with the characters' English or non-English first language:

Table 1. *Positive, negative and mixed characters by L1.*

	Positive	Negative	Mixed	Unclear
English L1	61	31	33	268
Other L1	35	58	31	132
Total	96	99	64	134

These results largely accord with those of Lippi-Green's (1997) seminal study on the accents of Disney characters. One of Lippi-Green's central findings is that while speakers of mainstream accents are predominantly characters with a positive evaluation, the negative characters are the largest group among those who speak English with a foreign (L2) accent, even though the overall majority of all negative characters in the corpus are speakers of mainstream English. In the corpus of multilingual movies (Bleichenbacher 2008), there are also significantly more negative characters among the L1 speakers of languages other than English than characters with a positive or mixed evaluation (58 as opposed to 35 and 31). Unlike in Lippi-Green's corpus, though, these speakers also form a majority (58 out of 99) among the total number of negative characters.

This is clearly an indication of negative stereotyping, which can partly be explained with the predominance of the action genre in the corpus; if the comedies are considered alone, there are significantly fewer negative characters and more positive ones. Interestingly, there is an interrelation between individual multilingualism – knowing a further language – and positive characterisation, but only among characters with English as a first language. Every sixth monolingual speaker of English as a first language is a positive character, but among those who speak at least one other language, two thirds are 'good guys'. Among speakers with a non-English first language, the same effect is not attested: knowing other languages does not turn these characters into better people.

The second example relates to the amount of English as opposed to other languages, which is very low overall despite the fact that the movies were chosen precisely because their setting and narrative are potentially multilingual. The following table lists a total of 7,216 turns spoken by characters in 16 movies, according to the language chosen: English, another language and mixed (with an intra-turn code-switch be-

tween English and another language). The rows break the language choice up into the first language of the characters who spoke the turns, either English or another language:

Table 2. *Speaker turns by L1 of speakers and language(s) used.*

Language of character's speaker turn <i>Character's first language</i>	English	Other language	Mixed (English and other language)	Total
<i>English L1</i>	3,977	101	52	4,130
<i>Other L1</i>	1,858	1,085	143	3,086
<i>Total</i>	5,835	1,186	195	7,216

The figures indicate that even in specifically ‘multilingual’ movies, there are almost five times as many turns that are in monolingual English (5,835) than there are turns in another language (1,186), and only very few turns feature code-switching. In addition, the comparison of the speakers’ first language is telling, in that the characters whose first language is English get to speak significantly more (4,130 as opposed to 3,086) than those with a non-English first language. This fact can be partly be explained by the narrative patterns which often feature protagonists who are L1 speakers of English, whereas characters with other first languages have comparatively minor roles, or speak less even if they are protagonists. A similar picture arises when entire scenes, rather than individual speaker turns, are contrasted. Of a total of 587 movie scenes analysed, there are almost as many scenes that are completely monolingual in English (238) as there are scenes with at least one word spoken in another language (241), and in only 108 scenes is the English language completely absent.

The marginalisation of non-English languages can also be pinpointed when other categories of analysis are taken into account. A comparison of language choice and the settings, moods and main activities of scenes shows that scenes where other languages are used typically take place in less prestigious settings, convey a darker mood, and feature conflictual rather than everyday activities. For instance, scenes that contain monolingual dialogue in a non-English language differ from scenes with English dialogue in that they typically take place outside buildings, rather than at movie characters’ homes or workplaces, where English is more dominant. Likewise, monolingual non-English dialogue prominently accompanies activities linked to criminal, military or political contexts, but only rarely contexts of friendship, love or even business – these seem to require dialogue that is either partly or wholly in English.

While many of these results support the case for linguicism in Hollywood movies, a number of open questions remain. Firstly, the results vary a lot across individual but apparently similar movies, nor can clear patterns be discerned with regard to the year of production, the different languages portrayed, or in many cases even to genre. Moreover, a comparison of the two main axes of analysis mentioned yields results that come somewhat as a surprise. Movies with many prominent negative characters who are also L1 speakers of another language also often contain more dialogue in languages other than English. In contrast, the amount of non-English dialogue is reduced in most movies where negative stereotyping against the speakers of these languages is less prominent. This means that the price for a small degree of intercultural stereotyping is a minimisation of non-English dialogue, whereas a lot of non-English dialogue typically serves to make the respective L1 speakers more saliently negative, rather than to contribute to their more balanced portrayal. From the point of view of methodology, the result implies that it is tricky to base an assessment on one axis of analysis (characterisation or language choice) only. In part, these findings may explain why in the majority of linguistic studies of movie dialogues, researchers have chosen approaches which are predominantly qualitative, and with a focus on a specific linguistic or cultural context; some recent examples include McGregor (2008), Warren (2008), Planchenault (2008), Petrucci (2008), Walshe (2009), as well as the other contributions to this special issue. In the following section, this approach is illustrated with a focus on the content of specific movie dialogue excerpts, those where characters talk about multilingual phenomena themselves.

### **3. Metalinguistic content of movie dialogues**

Explicit value judgments about languages, either English or another language, are relatively rare in the movies analysed, but there is no shortage of metalinguistic (typically metapragmatic) comments that are a rich source of (often implicit) language ideological discourse, which reflects some of the results discussed in the previous section (for an assessment of the importance of the analysis of metalinguistic discourse in critical sociolinguistics, see Coupland & Jaworski 2004: 36–40). A first prominent area is instances of characters commenting on their own or other characters' language competence. In the corpus movies, there are an almost equal number of speakers with English as a first language (257) and speakers of other first languages (258). However, only 43 of the former are depicted as speakers of another language (of whatever degree of fluency), while 131 (i.e. more than half) of the non-English speakers speak at least one other language – in most cases English, with a high

degree of fluency. Still, it is the English L1 speakers' individual multilingualism that is highlighted especially in a number of dialogues. My first example is William Wallace, the medieval Scottish freedom fighter and protagonist of *Braveheart*, whose multilingual education is pitted against that of Murrin, his first wife. In a scene early in the movie, Wallace tries to impress Murrin by speaking to her in French, and also promises to teach her literacy:

(1) (*Braveheart*)

Murrin: You're gonna teach me to read?

William: Aye, if you like.

Murrin: Aye.

William: In what language?

Murrin: (*chuckles*) You're showing off now.

Much later, when Wallace has already established his reputation as a serious military threat, his English enemies invite him to participate in peace negotiations. The English-born members of the royal family, who are all unequivocally depicted as negative characters, send the French-born Princess of Wales, Isabelle, to meet Wallace. At the meeting, Wallace impresses Isabelle by displaying his knowledge of two foreign languages, Latin and French:

(2) (*Braveheart*)

Wallace: Ego nunquam pronunciare mendacium, sed ego sum homo indomitus. Ou en français, si vous préférez? You ask your king, to his face. Ask him. And you see if his eyes can convince you of the truth.

(‘I never lie, but I am a savage man. Or in French if you prefer?’)

Wallace's multilingual performance indexes him as a bona fide member of the aristocracy, superior in many ways to his English opponents (who, with some degree of historical inaccuracy, are never shown using the French language at all); eventually, Isabelle even falls in love with him and supports him behind the back of the English rulers.

A contrasting case is the movie *Frantic*, where the protagonist's lack of foreign language competence repeatedly hinders his actions, even though he makes the best possible use of the few communication strategies that are available to him. The movie starts with the American cardiologist Richard Walker and his wife Sondra arriving in Paris and checking into their hotel to relax after the long flight from San Francisco. Both have been to Paris before, but only Sondra displays an im-



perfect but functional knowledge of French as a foreign language. When Sondra gets kidnapped by terrorists shortly after this, Richard is left on his own with virtually no knowledge of French. This fact becomes obvious in his numerous encounters with French persons while looking for Sondra, but it is also explicitly highlighted several times throughout the movie: by Sondra, by Richard himself (when he leaves a message on an answer phone in English, and adds 'Je parle non français' ('I don't speak French')), or when Michelle, a young French woman whose help he relies on, doubts his ability to have understood somebody's message ('you don't speak French'), which he counters with 'I had it translated'.

In contrast to the English L1 speakers' knowledge of foreign languages, in general the movie characters' knowledge of English as a foreign language is barely commented on at all, as if taken for granted, or is even presented in a negative light. While the former is the case for Michelle in *Frantic*, the latter can be pinpointed the historical drama *Elizabeth*, a British movie which depicts the life of the young Renaissance Queen of England struggling hard to keep her country free from any foreign (French, Spanish, Catholic) influence. Elizabeth repeatedly uses her sound L2 knowledge of French to achieve her aims, while the foreign characters often accommodate to English. Their respective proficiency is commented on twice in the movie. In one ballroom scene, the words 'speak up, he is French' can be heard, highlighting a potential comprehension problem. In another scene, the Spanish ambassador Alvaro's English proficiency is called into question by the queen in public, when her lover, Dudley, half-seriously asks Alvaro (whose agenda it is to get Elizabeth to marry the King of Spain) whether he would marry Elizabeth and him:

(3) (*Elizabeth*)

- Dudley: Monseñor Alvaro! Monseñor Alvaro! Monseñor Alvaro tell me, as well as ambassador, are you not also a bishop?
- Alvaro: I am, my Lord.
- Dudley: Then you can marry us.
- Elizabeth: (*laughs*)
- Alvaro: Marry you?
- Elizabeth: Oh, perhaps he does not know enough English to perform the ceremony!
- Alvaro: Alas, madam, in this matter I can be of no help to you.

Alvaro never actually speaks Spanish in the movie, and while he does have a Spanish accent, there are no interlanguage phenomena whatsoever in his English. Moreover, in spite of the multiple and serious face threats, his English remains adequately polite and formal. Still, Eliza-

beth's insulting comment serves to mark him linguistically as a foreigner – both within the reality of the story, and for the benefit of the audience. This reflects the overall very negative depiction of foreigners in the movie; seconds after the dialogue above, Elizabeth is almost assassinated by a sniper's arrow, and the next scene shows a scheming Alvaro trying to persuade Dudley to convert to Catholicism.

Similar examples of characters whose use of English as a second language is negatively portrayed are easy to come across. In *Sabrina*, a Hispanic American character is corrected by an impatient colleague simply because she says 'Mr Linus is not a gay', rather than 'gay' without the indefinite article, and in *French Kiss*, a Parisian concierge feels insulted when an American tourist asks him whether he speaks English, and answers: 'Of course madame, this is the George Cinq, not some backpacker's hovel'. A final example appears in the action thriller *The Peacemaker*. US Army Colonel Devoe is shown on a difficult mission tracking stolen nuclear arms in the Caucasus, where he encounters and arrests a corrupt scientist who has been collaborating with a group of terrorists:

(4) (*The Peacemaker*)

US soldier: We got a live one Colonel.

Devoe: Do you speak English?

Taraki: Yes I I went to Harvard. Go, Crimson! Help me up please.

(...)

Ken: Colonel the guy you caught is Dr Amir Taraki. Pakistani, PhD in astrophysics, educated at Harvard.

Devoe: That's right. We educated half the world's terrorists.

*The Peacemaker* is a movie which, in comparison with many other action thrillers involving Eastern European and Near Eastern settings, relies on relatively little negative stereotyping against non-Americans, and also contains a fair amount of dialogue in different languages. Still, the brief and minor episode just quoted shows that even in such a movie, instances of linguisticism can be pinpointed. A foreign student at Harvard University turns out to be a terrorist, whose chanting of the Harvard sports motto ('Go, Crimson') appears as a sorry attempt at a positive politeness strategy, as Devoe charges him at gunpoint. Moreover, from the point of view of sociolinguistic realism, it remains questionable why a citizen from a classic country where English is a second language (ESL) would need to have learnt English at Harvard University to begin with. In sum, the metalinguistic statements are in line with the results of the quantitative analysis discussed in the previous section: individual multi-

lingualism among characters with English as a first language is rare but prominently highlighted, while the inverse is true for speakers of another language. Linguicism operates not just against the mere use of other languages by any speakers, but also and specifically against those characters who represent the worldwide majority of users of English for whom it is a foreign language. Unsurprisingly, it also holds true for the small category of characters from an ESL context. In the next section, I discuss a small number of texts written by members of the movie audience in response to scenes such as the ones quoted above. Multilingual language use and issues of (socio)linguistic realism serve as discussion topics, where linguist patterns are occasionally defended, but more often exposed and countered.

#### **4. Metalinguistic debates on an internet message board**

In this section, my focus is on the reaction of the audience to some of the characteristics of multilingual movie dialogues discussed so far. The data are taken from the ‘message boards’ available online at *The Internet Movie Database* (IMDb), a long-standing website containing information on a wide range of movies from all over the world and throughout film history. Any internet user who has signed up to the site can read and contribute to these message boards. The boards function as asynchronous chat forums where users can either respond to an existing topic with nested posts, or start a new discussion. As is often the case, the contributions are screened by the website moderators who may intervene in the case of inappropriate entries, typically by deleting them (rather than intervening in the discussion themselves). The contributors comment on the movies’ cinematography, the story, the acting, and any other aspect that is in some way related to the movie; threads usually start either with some kind of observation and judgment that other contributors then react to, or with an information or interpretation question for other contributors to answer. English is the default language of the message board; as often, it is used with varying degrees of stylistic license, and also proficiency in the case of contributors for whom it is not a first language. The tone of the interactions between different message authors (who are unlikely to know each other in real life, and typically use pseudonyms) is overall friendly and cooperative, though debates can also assume an aggressive key, in particular when a debate about a movie is informed by fundamental ideological (or other) disagreements between contributors. While some of the board users display a more profound or even professional knowledge of the movies, many are likely to be members of the audience in Richardson’s more general sense of ‘interested ordinary viewers’ (2010: 98); even though the topic of the discussion is

often quite specific, the registers used are reminiscent of entertainment journalism or other relatively relaxed and clearly non-academic genres.

For this study, all message board entries for the 32 corpus movies (see section 2 above) that were available online in August 2010 were manually checked for all discussion topics that are related, in some way or other, to multilingualism. This resulted in a corpus of 19 ‘folklinguistic’ (see Planchenault in this special issue) threads (linked to 13 movies), containing a total of 179 messages, or about 9 per thread (see Appendix 2). Obviously, these threads represent only a very small part of the message boards as such, as any single message board of one movie often contains dozens of threads. A broad content analysis of the metalinguistic comments in the IMDb message boards analysed reveals that these comments fall into three major categories. First, patterns of replacement (see above) result in intensive debates about the legitimacy of this strategy in general, or about how it is used in specific movies. Secondly, the non-English dialogues in other movies engender requests for translation whenever the movies in question fail to offer any possibility of rendering this dialogue comprehensible. A third and minor area of viewers’ interest are comments on the actors’ performances in a specific variety or language, for instance when an English-speaking actor impersonates a character with a different first language, or imitates – with more or less success, depending on the viewer’s judgment – a certain native or non-native accent. In what follows, the first two areas are discussed and illustrated, and in a final section, one specific debate is analysed in some more detail.

#### *4.1 Message board threads about replacement*

Replacement strategies are common in the case in which movies are largely or entirely set in non-English speaking contexts, though their use is seldom taken for granted in the threads pertaining to the movies in question. A first example is the movie *The Pianist*, set in World War II Warsaw and depicting Polish and German characters. While in one thread, contributors debate why, in the movie’s spoken dialogue, it is only the Polish language that is replaced by English (but not German), another thread begins with an ironic rejection of the replacement strategy. The thread is entitled ‘no Polish in a movie about Polish People, how nice’, and the initiator expresses his disappointment, which is fuelled by the fact that he shares the director Roman Polanski’s Polish background: ‘Ok did this just bother me? Really Roman? No Polish?’ Other message writers respond by justifying Polanski’s choice with more pragmatic arguments, that it is a common strategy, for instance, in Biblical movies; that English has many more speakers than Polish, and that many people dislike reading subtitles. Then, in a statement that is remi-

niscent of the ideology of ‘one nation—one language’, one contributor questions the validity of Polish outside the country itself: ‘Want to watch a movie in Polish? Watch a Polish movie’. What this seemingly common-sense argument obfuscates is that *The Pianist* is to a large extent a Polish movie, in terms of setting as well as production location. At this stage, two other contributors join the debate to agree with the initiator’s opinion, both describing how their linguistic biography affects their experience of the movie. One contributor states that they are leaving the US to spend a year in Poland and would have liked to hear some Polish in preparation because ‘you don’t hear much Polish in the US’, and a second person describes their disappointment when watching movies where English replaces their first language Dutch, and states that an Anne Frank movie (set in the Netherlands, but with English speaking characters) ‘annoyed me to no end and I eventually turned it off because I just couldn’t stand it’. These statements show that replacement strategies, however often they have been used throughout movie history, are far from being generally welcomed or even accepted at least by some members of the audience – especially if their linguistic biography prompts them to contest what they consider a disappointingly unrealistic reflection of sociolinguistic realities.

#### 4.2 Requests for translation

In a number of cases, people make use of the message boards to obtain an English translation of non-English dialogue, or to ask for an exact transcription of dialogue in a foreign language. For instance, a key scene in the romantic comedy *Fools Rush In* shows the Mexican American protagonist Isabel talking in Spanish with her great grandmother in Mexico, who encourages Isabel to commit herself to her lover by saying the Spanish equivalent of ‘you will never know love unless you surrender to it’. A contributor starts a thread asking for the exact Spanish wording, and three other contributors react, each one offering the version spoken in the movie. There are similar threads asking about a short piece of Russian dialogue in *The Hunt for Red October*, and French in *French Kiss*; accurate translations and transcripts are offered in both cases. In the latter examples, the content of the turns is largely irrelevant for an appreciation of the narrative, which may explain why the filmmakers did not subtitle them in the first place, unlike in other scenes in the same movie (see Bleichenbacher 2008: 181–183).

Requests for translation are especially prominent in the case of the war movie *Saving Private Ryan*, which shows American soldiers during the D-Day Invasion of Normandy interacting with speakers of French, German and (in one scene) Czech. In *Saving Private Ryan*, there are no

interlingual subtitles by default, and dialogue in other languages is only occasionally interpreted into English by a character. In the message board entries relating to specific scenes in the movie, accurate translations are usually offered, though some contributors are also prompted to offering less-than-serious suggestions. One scene shows a soldier in a German army uniform shouting, in Czech, ‘Don’t shoot, I’m Czech, I didn’t kill anyone’. The line remains incomprehensible to any viewer unacquainted with Czech, and large parts of the audience may fail to realise that the language is Czech (rather than German) in the first place. The same is true, within the story, for the American soldiers who shoot the Czech character because he has been fighting for their German enemies. In the thread, while the accurate translation is offered by one helpful contributor, there is a first series of messages containing obviously incorrect and humorous mistranslations. These include ‘Er, Micky Mouse, Micky Mouse!!! Shoot Micky Mouse!!!’, ‘Can you tell us where the bus stop is?’, ‘Y..M..C...A’, ‘quick, maken for ze sun loungers vile ze dirty britisher pig dogs are at ze bar’, and, tellingly, ‘Look, I vashed for supper!’, a mock translation spoken in the movie scene by a Czech soldier’s killer.

The contributors to this thread take obvious pleasure in displaying their knowledge of catch phrases that are often linked to the relationship between German and English speakers in different contexts, such as, in the examples above, the movie itself (‘Mickey Mouse’ refers to ‘Steamboat Willie’, the name assigned to a major German character in *Saving Private Ryan*), World War II in general, or even the more recent ‘towel wars’ between German and British tourists on Mediterranean beaches. The parodies often display a use of Mock German (see Higgins & Furu-kawa, in this special issue, on Mock Hawai’ian), with imitations of phonological phenomena (such as <zis> for *this*, to imitate *th*-fronting) or morphological license (the replacement of ‘my’ with *mine* in ‘mine bum’, to imitate the German possessive article *mein*). One motivation for the contributors’ reactions is likely to lie in the fact that the questions have been asked and answered before in other parts of the website; the mistranslations thus figure as a creative punishment for the initiator not to have first sought the information elsewhere. In line with Sebba’s findings on the social meanings of orthographic variation (Sebba 2007: 56–57), the Mock German in these messages serves the message writers to establish their identity as authorities on the movie in question, who mark their group boundary against other contributors who are considered less competent due to their lack of familiarity with board etiquette, having asked redundant questions. Since in these contributions the language ideological discourse operates in a largely implicit way and is also interwoven with other, not primarily language-related topics, linguicism is

less easy for the analyst either to pinpoint or to rule out. What the examples share with the more explicit message board entries, discussed in the next section, is their reliance on humour and irony, despite the serious nature of the movie discussed. In fact, the instances of orthographic creativity can well be seen as ‘showing an oppositional stance with respect to the mainstream’ (Sebba 2007: 56), perhaps even an enjoyment of ‘not being politically correct’, in that they both highlight and ridicule depictions of serious conflict situations, including, in these two examples, a war crime – the shooting of an enemy who has capitulated – and the killing, in combat, of a Jewish American by a German soldier.

#### 4.3 Explicit language ideologies: From the screen to the thread

While language ideologies underlie many of the message board debates discussed so far, the most explicit language ideological debate (Blommaert 1999) in the corpus analysed is related to a scene in the romantic comedy *Just Married*. Tom and Sarah, two American honeymooners in Europe, check into what is presented to them (and the audience) as a stereotypically traditional hotel in the French Alps, and soon trigger a fire alarm after tampering with the dated electric equipment. This infuriates Henri, the French hotel owner, and a heated argument ensues:

##### (5) (*Just Married*)

Henri: My grandparents installed the wiring in the hotel before World War First. It worked fine until you young kids had to bring out your toys and ignore the sign.

*A small monolingual sign on the wall is shown in close-up:*  
DEFENSE D’UTILISER DES APPAREILS ELECTRIQUES (Do not use electric equipment)

Tom: The – that is the the that’s in French for Christ’s sakes.

Henri: That’s because we’re in France.

Sarah: Is there anything we could do?

Henri: Pay the damages.

Tom: (*chuckles*) Hold on there Jacques.

Henri: (*slowly and clearly*) Je m’appelle Henri Margeaux.

Tom: Whatever. Look, this hotel gets guests from all over the world. It’s your responsibility to put some American on your signs.

Sarah: He means English.

Tom: Sarah, (*whispers*) I’m trying to negotiate.

As can be expected, the negotiation goes wrong: after a further heated exchange of francophobic and anti-American slurs, the Americans are expelled from the hotel. On a macro level, the scene reflects and comically exploits the long-standing conflict (reheated at the moment of production due to disagreements over Iraq) between the USA as a de facto global power, and France as a country with dwindling global influence. Then, the scene is interesting from a sociolinguistic view in that the dialogue explicitly refers to the status of English and French as world languages in a concrete context, the linguistic landscape in a tourist environment. On the one hand, the fact that an important security message is presented in monolingual French can be interpreted as a comment on the rather strict and purist language policies against the use of other languages (particularly English) in public space (and elsewhere) that the French state is known for. On the other hand, the French monolingual ideology, vigorously defended by Henri, the eminently inhospitable hotel owner, is contrasted with its American counterpart, when Tom calls his language ‘American’ and implies that the use of the national language on the sign is absurd, even though his wife actually knows French. In Lippi-Green’s (1997) terms, Tom expects the ‘communicative burden’ (that is, the burden to accommodate to one’s interlocutor) to be assumed completely by his French interlocutors; Henri actually does so by using English, but with a highly exaggerated reluctance. On a theoretical level, the problem portrayed is not so much a clash between an ideology of English-only triumphalism, on the one hand, and one of multiculturalism, where the benefits of mutual language learning for cross-cultural communication are highlighted (Demont-Heinrich 2010), on the other. Rather, the communicative breakdown is caused by the clash of two opposing triumphalist viewpoints – which Sarah, who represents the idea of (elite) multilingualism and pluriculturalism, fails to prevent.

The IMDb message board thread concerned with this scene is entitled ‘french outlet plot hole’ and starts with the argument that the choice of French for the sign makes no sense because the sign should indeed be addressed to foreign visitors. This is in line with Tom’s viewpoint, but is interpreted as a shortcoming of the movie’s authors: ‘So either the directors made a mistake here or French people really are that pompous. Hmm, on second thought ...’ A second contributor reacts by pointing out that for foreign visitors, other languages than English would be sensible as well (German, Japanese, Russian): ‘I hate to say it, but this attitude that the whole world must cater for English-speakers is what is pompous, not the fact that a French hotel owner in France dares to put up a sign in his native language’. The interaction between the various message authors then gets more animated as they debate the exact meaning of the text on the sign: ‘No offense, but when I read this kind of



replies it makes me think that the stereotypical “dumb American” is more than based on reality. Also, knowing the basics of a few foreign languages wouldn’t hurt you ...’, which is met with the following reaction, where the adjective ‘pompous’ used by the initiator is repeated yet again: ‘You don’t know the nationality of anyone in this thread, so to just assume because that they don’t agree with you they must be dumb Americans is fairly pompous as well’. Finally, some contributors highlight the fictional and narrative rather than realistic interest of the French sign: ‘lol – in the movie, the joke is that Ashton Kutcher is dumb enough to ask the same question’, and ‘they put the sign in french on purpose. So that Ashtons character could get angry over the sign and how stupid it was’. The debate shows how a seemingly innocuous scene in a movie which offers a rather basic kind of entertainment results in an intensive argument where the contributors express genuine concern about issues such as cultural and linguistic hegemony – precisely the kind of phenomena that the Hollywood industry has been charged with perpetuating.

These examples illustrate a phenomenon that is common to many of the IMDb message board threads, namely the extent to which movie viewers recognise issues of linguistic ideology when they are prominently presented, even in mainstream movies and when they are comically distorted, and debate them on a number of different levels. They draw on their everyday or specialist knowledge of linguistic facts, relate what they see to be their own experiences, negotiate differences between fiction and reality, comment on possible narrative functions of different kinds of dialogue and are eager to contest, in a sometimes perhaps surprisingly emotional way, both cinematic representations and other viewers’ reactions. In the language of the messages, there are different correlates of this eagerness to debate. These include expressions of disagreement and terms of insult, but also the use of a certain linguistic terminology. A final indication of the movie viewers’ active role is that cases of inconsistency or even mistakes in the representation of sociolinguistic realities, whether they have occurred in a movie or in someone else’s message, are typically corrected and commented on both fast and in detail: the audience does not just absorb, it talks back.

## **5. Conclusion**

In this brief overview of different sociolinguistic approaches to movie dialogues, it has become clear that Hollywood’s depiction of multilingualism is, to a large degree, stereotypical. Linguicism directed at languages other than English may not appear as obviously explicit as, say, in the triumphalist and anglophile statements that are frequently quoted

in Phillipson's work (1992, 2009). Still, it arises as a main result from the quantitative study of multilingualism in Hollywood movies, and also from an analysis of metalinguistic content in the same movies' dialogue. With respect to the reaction of the audience, the picture becomes less straightforward. The analysis of message board content on *The Internet Movie Database* website confirms a fact that has gained increasing acceptance in film studies (see, for instance, Staiger 2000), namely that audience reactions are as diverse as audiences themselves. For a critical sociolinguistic approach, this means that, however narrowly stereotypical Hollywood representations of sociolinguistic realities may be, they are consistently questioned and debated by members of the audience. A wide variety of viewpoints can be pinpointed, and while some contributors do justify aspects of the linguistic representations discussed above, there is a general acceptance of, and even a frequent enthusiasm about instances of multilingual diversity in the movies, including the use of languages other than English (rather than their replacement), and a high degree of fidelity when it comes to the actors' performance in a specific variety, or specific details regarding the sociolinguistic context in which a movie is set.

Thus, even if linguisticism and English-only triumphalism are the dominant discourses produced by the mainstream movies as the result of a top-down language planning process, other discourses prevail among the relatively unplanned and heterogeneous audience reactions, even those from a popular and mainstream website such as the Internet Movie Database, rather than some obscure underground source. Indeed, hegemonic discourses appear much less monolithic than in the early days of research on linguisticism, which is in line with a general 'change in perspective towards the value' of multilingualism (Franceschini 2009: 30). One major agenda for future research, then, is to trace whether this shift has begun to affect the industry as well.

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### **Appendix 1: Corpus films**

*Amadeus* (1984), dir. Milos Forman, screenplay by Peter Shaffer (The Saul Zaentz Company).

*Behind Enemy Lines* (2001), dir. John Moore, screenplay by David Veloz and Zak Penn (Davis Entertainment).

*The Bourne Identity* (2002), dir. Doug Liman, screenplay by Tony Gilroy and W. Blake Herron (Hypnotic *et al.*).

*Braveheart* (1995), dir. Mel Gibson, screenplay by Randall Wallace (Icon Productions).

*Clear and Present Danger* (1994), dir. Phillip Noyce, screenplay by Donald Stewart *et al.* (Paramount Pictures).

- Elizabeth* (1998), dir. Shekhar Kapur screenplay by Michael Hirst (Channel Four Films *et al.*).
- Fools Rush In* (1997), dir. Andy Tennant, screenplay by Katherine Reback (Columbia Pictures).
- Frantic* (1988), dir. Roman Polanski, screenplay by Roman Polanski and Gérard Brach (Mount and Warner Bros.).
- French Kiss* (1995), dir. Lawrence Kasdan, screenplay by Adam Brooks (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox *et al.*).
- Goldeneye* (1995), dir. Michael Campbell, screenplay by Jeffrey Caine and Bruce Feirstein (United Artists).
- Green Card* (1990), dir. Peter Weir, screenplay by Peter Weir (Touchstone Pictures *et al.*).
- Hannibal* (2001), dir. Ridley Scott, screenplay by David Mamet and Steven Zaillian (Dino de Laurentiis Productions *et al.*).
- The Hunt for Red October* (1990), dir. John McTiernan, screenplay by Larry Ferguson and Donald Stewart (Nina Saxon Film Design and Paramount Pictures).
- The Jackal* (1997), dir. Michael Caton-Jones, screenplay by Chuck Pfarrer (Alphaville Films *et al.*).
- Just Married* (2003), dir. Shawn Levy, screenplay by Sam Harper (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox *et al.*).
- Licence to Kill* (1989), dir. John Glen, screenplay by Michael G. Wilson and Richard Maibaum (United Artists *et al.*).
- The Living Daylights* (1987), dir. John Glen, screenplay by Richard Maibaum and Michael G. Wilson (United Artists *et al.*).
- The Peacemaker* (1997), dir. Mimi Leder, screenplay by Michael Schiffer (Dream-Works SKG).
- The Pianist* (2002), dir. Roman Polanski, screenplay by Ronald Harwood (Studio Canal + *et al.*).
- Red Heat* (1988), dir. Walter Hill, screenplay by Harry Kleiner *et al.* (Carolco Pictures *et al.*).
- Sabrina* (1995), dir. Sidney Pollack, screenplay by Barbara Benedek and David Rayfiel (Paramount Pictures *et al.*).
- Saving Private Ryan* (1998), dir. Steven Spielberg, screenplay by Robert Rodat (Amblin Entertainment *et al.*).
- Schindler's List* (1993), dir. Steven Spielberg, screenplay by Steven Zaillian (Amblin Entertainment *et al.*).
- The Sum of All Fears* (2002), dir. Phil Alden Robinson, screenplay by Paul Attanasio and Daniel Pyne (Paramount Pictures).
- Tomorrow Never Dies* (1997), dir. Roger Spottiswoode, screenplay by Bruce Feirstein (United Artists *et al.*).
- Traffic* (2000), dir. Steven Soderbergh, screenplay by Stephen Gaghan (Initial Entertainment Group *et al.*).
- A View to a Kill* (1985), dir. John Glen, screenplay by Richard Maibaum and Michael G. Wilson (United Artists *et al.*).
- The World Is Not Enough* (1999), dir. Michael Apted, screenplay by Neil Purvis *et al.* (United Artists *et al.*).

## **Appendix 2: IMDB Board Threads Cited**

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