

Linguistic replacement in the movies

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In my contribution, I discuss semiotic aspects of the use of the English language in movie dialogues where, logically, the fictional characters would have used other languages. The phenomenon of linguistic replacement is a shared characteristic of many Hollywood movies (as well as countless other fictional narratives, written or performed) with settings that are linguistically different from their base language of narration. Thus, Austrian composers, Russian submarine commanders, or Polish pianists speak English, rather than – as in ‘reality’ – German, Russian, or Polish.

My observations are based on a corpus of twelve recent (1984-2003) and commercially successful Hollywood movies with European and American settings. Six movies from the James Bond 007 series are complemented by films set in the 18th century (Milos Forman’s *Amadeus*), World War II (*Schindler’s List*, *The Pianist*), the Cold War (*The Hunt for Red October*), during the 1990 drug wars in South America (*Clear and Present Danger*), and in present-day Italy (*Hannibal*).

My starting point is a taxonomy proposed by the Czech scholar Petr Mareš, who distinguishes between different linguistic and non-linguistic means to make the process of replacement obvious to the viewer. For instance, viewers may have to activate their world knowledge to infer that characters would not really be using English. There, the question arises to what extent this world knowledge can be presupposed, or whether the viewers must be helped by means of explicit metalinguistic statements. Another option for filmmakers is to exploit a contrast between the visual input of linguistic landscape in other languages, and the aural input of English dialogue. In fact, linguistic replacement is much harder to perform in the case of written language: English signs in 1939 Warsaw appear eminently more absurd than the English spoken by the characters who read them. However, the problem of comprehensibility, elegantly solved by linguistic replacement, immediately reappears with writing in foreign languages and scripts. Here, I shall argue that the depiction of heterolingual or even multilingual signs fulfils more complex symbolic functions than just to serve as a strategy of compensatory realism.

A further set of strategies is derived from phenomena of multilingualism in discourse, such as the use of second language accents or of unrealistic patterns of code-switching. L2 accents conveniently point to the replaced language in a continuous way, but they carry a latent risk of linguistic stereotyping. Therefore, they are typically used only by some characters in a movie (though not necessarily by the bad guys only), while others speak less marked varieties of English. Finally, it is the phenomenon of unrealistic code-switching where the essential absurdity of linguistic replacement is rendered most obvious by the multimodality of the cinematic text. Characters begin a conversation in a non-English language but then switch into English, an act which is accompanied by a marked cinematographic device (such as slow motion or a rapid zoom) that highlights its unrealistic nature. At the same time, this absence of realism can be compensated by a highly plausible lexical trigger of the code-switch in question.

In conclusion, I offer some tentative explanations for a recent shift away from linguistic replacement and towards more multilingualism in the movies.