From Audrey Hepburn to Nicolas Cage; How Language and Dialect has Evolved in Movies

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In "From Audrey Hepburn to Nicolas Cage; How Language and Dialect has Evolved in Movies" the correlation between linguistic factors used in movies for character development and how we perceive such factors in real life is explored. The three movies, *Roman Holiday* (1953), *Valley Girl* (1983), and *Knives Out* (2019) were chosen for analysis due to their linguistic approach to character development and plots which center around class dynamics. Choosing movies from three distinctly different eras of film allowed for a wide scope through which to explore how linguistic factors have been used over time. This analysis is supplemented by survey results, these results show the average person's relationship and perception with the correlation between such linguistic factors and class. This topic is important because observational learning persists even in a fictional setting. Understanding more about influential movies helps us to better understand our own worldviews and those of others.

With the expanding presence of movies and television in our lives, it seems that the language used in these mediums we regularly consume can greatly affect how we perceive the world. In no medium is this as evident as in movies, as Paul Murphy explains in "Sociolinguistics in Movies: A Call for Research,": "A Hollywood director must attend to the minute details of everyday human interaction as he creates their semblance for the screen. Situational variables of nearly any sort have appeared on film and so has a correspondingly rich catalog of small-group and individual speech behaviors" (226). Because of this, I plan to investigate the sociolinguistic implications of the use of dialect and accents by analyzing three movies from three different eras: *Roman Holiday* (1953), *Valley Girl* (1983), and *Knives Out* (2019). This analysis will be supplemented with survey results, exploring the implications of such linguistic characteristics in movies and how they translate to real life. In all movies discussed, class plays a defining role in the plot and accents and dialects are used to highlight class differences.

Roman Holiday uses linguistic factors to illustrate class differences when Princess Ann, played by Audrey Hepburn, runs away from her royal responsibilities while in Rome and meets American journalist, Joe Bradley-played by Gregory Peck. In one of *Roman Holiday's* most famous scenes, Audrey Hepburn's character admits that she's run away from her responsibilities to Joe Bradley. This is a pivotal scene in the film as Joe decides that Ann should enjoy her newfound freedom and takes her to do all the things she's dreamed of. Ann's dialect is so precise in this conversation that she almost sounds robotic when she admits that on her day off she'd, "Like to sit at a sidewalk café, and look in shop windows- walk in the rain! Have fun and maybe some excitement!" When Hepburn delivers her lines, she seemingly pronounces each letter in a word, making them come together in the most proper way possible. In contrast to this, Joe's dialect comes off as slightly more down to earth since he incorporates fewer formal pronunciations. For example, he responds to Ann, "Tell ya what- why don't we do all those things, together?" Though the actors use dialects differently, they convey that their characters are well-educated people of high social and economic standing while also reminding the audience of their differences. Hepburn's character, above Joe in both class and linguistic demeanor, never looks down on him and he never treats her as superior. Though their dialects show the characters' potential to be divided by their differences, they are ultimately united by their similarities.

Later at a party, Joe and Ann meet an acquaintance of hers, a barber with a thick Italian accent. As more of a working man, the barber's accent is a foil to those of the two main characters. He says things like: "Why you not come dancing tonight with me? You should see, so nice!" and "If you come, you will be most pretty of all girl!" According to Julia Dobrow and Calvin Gidney as they write in their article titled, "The Good, the Bad, and the Foreign: The Use of Dialect in Children's Animated Television," "Language is a

powerful means of signaling social and personal identity. In fact, it is one of the principal means by which we distinguish members of our own and other communities. Our speech can provide indications of our age, ethnicity, gender identity, region of origin, and socioeconomic status," (107). While the barber is a minor character and not all these aspects are communicated through what little lines he has, he nonetheless represents a differing economic standing and nationality which has become increasingly sought out in movies today. The inclusion of characters with noticeably different nationalities and the representation of minorities helps to convey Ann and Joe's removal from the familiar and their experience with the novel while in Rome.

Though Ann is surrounded by this unfamiliarity with the ideas, concepts, and dialects presented to her, she never changes her manner of speaking. Unlike other movies in which a change in a character's dialect reflects their inner change, Ann's maintenance of her distinctive way of speaking reinforces her decision at the end of the movie to accept her responsibilities at the price of her freedom. This is shown to the audience in her dialect, which conveys how uncompromising she is in her values.

In *Valley Girl,* Deborah Foreman plays Julie, who lives a seemingly shallow life in the San Fernando Valley of California until she meets Randy at a party and, much to the disgust of her peers, soon falls in love with the bad boy from Hollywood played by Nicolas Cage. The 1983 movie offers a unique approach to investigating linguistic features with its young cast of characters and many different accents portraying polarized social classes. The movie begins with Julie's dialect being highlighted by the conversation between her and her friends with her admission, "It's like I'm totally not in love with you anymore Tommy." The line and its delivery illustrate typical characteristics ascribed to someone like Julie whose family is well off and lives in the valley. The movie portrays valley speak as a dialect used by a younger crowd who are caught up in shallow and materialistic ambitions as they are trying to compensate for their insipid personalities. Furthermore, Julie's dialect is shown as a learned trait as neither of her parents talk the way she does. This implies that the way she speaks is a conscious decision she made so that she'd be more likable, popular, or just to better fit in with her friends. When Julie meets Randy, she admits he "...For sure doesn't dress like my friends, or even talk like 'em." This is when she experiences the beginning of her growth as a character, keeping in mind how she's built her identity on the defining linguistic factors of a valley girl and yet likes Randy even though he's the antithesis of all of it. As Julie continues to spend time with Randy, she adopts some of his linguistic mannerisms. This is seen when Julie's friends try to dissuade her from hanging around Randy because they think it'll negatively affect her social standing to be seen with him. Julie shows her deviation from her class and geographical norm when she adopts Randy's coarse and direct way of speaking, momentarily abandoning her own dialect, to respond to her friends' bad advice.

In Allen Bell's "Language Style as Audience Design" published in the 1984 issue of *Language In Society,* he analyzes the external effects on linguistic features on the grounds that "linguistic variation correlates with variation in a speaker's class, gender, social network, and so forth," (145). Randy's influence on Julie is an external influence on her dialect and evidences her changing perception of the world around her as she shifts her identity away from what her peers expect of her and embraces her own way of looking at things, to which Randy acts as a catalyst. Bell states that: "We must not confuse the linguistic code with extralinguistic factors which may affect the code. Just as the so-called social axis is correlated with certain extralinguistic factors, so the 'style' axis should be correlated with genuinely independent variables," (145). To put his idea in context: one's linguistic style, which is the conscious decisions we make with our dialect, is constantly being influenced by unpredictable and even social variables. This could mean that one's dialect or accent has the potential to reveal much more about them than their education level or where they're from. In the movie, Julie's character arc exemplifies linguistic factors reflecting unseen influences and inner change as she grows in response to the situation. This is seen as she changes her mindset about popularity and shifts her focus away from shallow relationships to valuing deepening relationships above those she previously had with her friends and ex-boyfriend Tommy. In this change, we see Bell's theory in action. As for the real world, this indicates that the linguistic factors we possess can tell what we've allowed to influence us. It gives an insight into the colored lenses we see the world through, which make up the mosaic of our identities.

Knives Out offers an insight into class distinction when Harlen Thrombey, patriarch of an upper-class family, suddenly dies, leaving his family (played by Jamie Lee Curtis, Don Johnson, Toni Collette, and Chris Evens) and his caretaker Marta, (Ana de Armas) to grapple with his death which is investigated by southern detective Benoit Blanc, played by Daniel Craig. The cast of characters in the movie *Knives Out* offers many

linguistic factors for investigation. The most prevalent factor, however, is the contrasting dialectic manners of Linda and Marta. At only five minutes into the *Knives Out*, the characters' dialects reveal much about them. When Linda describes Marta in her police statement as a "Good girl. Hard worker. Family's from Ecuador" the audience gets the impression that Linda is authoritative and confident through her concise and clipped manner of speaking, which combined with her clear enunciation, makes everything she says seem like a prepared speech. Whereas Marta is portrayed as sympathetic and meek by her consistent soft tone and hushed pitch. Marta tends to speak with a gentle intonation, which makes her seem unsure of even her truthful statements. Marta acts as Linda's dialectical opposite, where Linda asks a question as a statement- because she thinks she already knows the answer- Marta allows her statements to become questions, likely because she is more used to listening rather than being listened to. The differing economic standings of Linda and Marta have influenced their perception of the world and the effect of which has trickled down to influence their dialects, too.

In his article published in *Anthropological Linguistics* called, "Sociolinguistics and Anthropology," author David Minderhout discusses the discipline of Sociolinguistics and his studies on dialect and class on the island of Tobago. He writes:

It occurred to me in my analysis both of the speech variables and of the social class of the speakers that the relationship might well be reversed. That is, the frequency of use of a speech feature could be used as a diagnostic tool to analyze the social class of a speaker. Instead of social class being used to measure linguistic usage, linguistic features should be taken as measures of social class (173).

In his findings he evidences the observable correlation between dialect and class, Minderhout asserts that "linguistic features" can be accurate "measures of social class." To put his idea in the context of *Knives Out*, Linda and Marta's dialects are used to emphasize their differences and further illustrate the power distribution in the group of characters. This power distribution is especially evident at the climax of the movie when Marta, the caretaker, is found out to be the sole beneficiary of Harlen's will.

Another important linguistic aspect of *Knives Out* is the accent of Detective Benoit Blanc. His southern drawl plays into the audience's expectation that he'll be a slow and daft detective and was used to add to the twist ending by subverting audience expectations. In the process of piecing the case together, Blanc articulates his thought process referencing that he "Spoke in the car about the hole at the center of this doughnut. And yes, what you and Harlen did that fateful night seems at first glance to fill that hole perfectly. A doughnut hole in a doughnut's hole. But we must look a little closer. And when we do, we see the doughnut hole has a hole in its center- it is not a doughnut hole but a smaller doughnut with its own hole- and our doughnut is not whole at all!" Blanc's accent in this monologue serves the additional purpose of setting him apart from the other characters and conveys his alternative mode of thinking, allowing us to hear that this character is very different from anyone else introduced in the movie.

In all three movies, it was a common theme that a character's dialect reflected their inner change or lack thereof. In *Roman Holiday* Ann never adopts her companion's slightly more relaxed way of talking, foreshadowing that she'll stay true to her royal roots and responsibilities. Julie's dialect changing in the movie *Valley Girl* helps to illustrate Randy's influence over her and her process of grappling with growing up and outgrowing ideas. Similarly to Ann, Marta's lack of dialectical change in *Knives Out* helps to convey her uncompromising honesty and ability to stay true to herself even when under intense scrutiny. Collectively these movies show that dialect and other linguistic factors are heavily influenced by our perception of the world and have the ability to reflect that to audiences.

In Allen Bell's "Language Style as Audience Design," he asserts that the speaker's dialect and pronunciation changes with audience perception in the quote, "Sociolinguistics has long since established that speakers can produce, and listeners perceive, very fine quantitative differences. It does not seem far-fetched to link the two and propose that a speaker's production of a level for a variable can occur in response to perception of an addressee's level for that variable..." Bell's stance can also be applied to my idea that one's dialect can change in response to changing perception, wherein one person is essentially acting as both the audience and the speaker.

In a survey that asked if dialects in movies helped to reflect real life, the majority of people surveyed agreed that they do, with a few saying variations of a movie's accuracy depended upon the actor's abilities which can either enhance the realism or ruin the whole effect. The most telling results from the survey, however, was when those taking it were asked if they believed they spoke with an accent and if they did what it says about them. Even when surveyees answered that they didn't speak with an accent, one admitted that they do speak with certain telling linguistic factors, which may possess

some correlation to class. This particular surveyee's awareness of how their dialect is correlated to class said that this knowledge comes from the perception that people from higher classes distance themselves from their dialect by omitting the use of slang. As Dobrow and Gidney observed, dialect is a way in which we distinguish or distance ourselves from certain communities and here we see an example of that happening (108). Additionally, in this survey answer we see Bell's theory that a speaker will adapt to their audiences' linguistic factors so that the "communicators have no problem using the ingroup's code" is also true in reverse: that a communicator will purposefully omit the linguistic factors of their audience to distance themselves from them. Furthermore, this idea is seen in Lila Abu-Lughod's research on the correlation between culture and television, in which she ties in her observations from her time in an Upper Egyptian village writing, "[A woman] distanced herself in moral language from what she perceived as a cultural difference between life here, in Upper Egyptian villages, and there, in Alexandria, Cairo, or other cities," (116). This idea that people are also using linguistic factors to make distinctions between themselves and others they view as not like them is similar to what we see in movies as dialect was used to both illustrate similarities and differences between characters.

Finally, when asked if there is currently a way to distinguish a person's economic standing based on their dialect, those who took the survey seemed to either think that there isn't a definitive way to distinguish a person's class based on their dialect or that it depended on the specific situation. This perceived weak correlation between dialect and class represents a very different stance than what is portrayed in movies as it is a common way to reinforce class-driven plots and an indicator of character development.

I initially believed that dialect would be a revealing element in both movies and real life, to show societal standards, gender roles, and class divides. While my research proves my initial belief was correct, what I didn't anticipate was just how integral dialects would be in driving and reinforcing character development in the movies I analyzed. This realization of how important and telling dialects are in movies led me to be even more surprised at the survey results as I believed they would reinforce the correlation I saw. Though the correlation is evident as Dobrow and Gidney write, "American dialects vary according to ethnicity, gender, and social class" it seems that this correlation is one that we may not be consciously acknowledging, however, I believe that this is a connection we acknowledge nonetheless as it contributes to our classification of people and communities (110). The movies analyzed convey a strong correlation between dialect and class and while the connection in real life is evident, it is not as overt as it's portrayed to be in movies.

The level of linguistic realism reflected in a movie can influence the message and the overall atmosphere that the characters exist in. If Hepburn had talked in any other manner in *Roman Holiday,* her progression as a character wouldn't have made sense to the audience; just as if Forman's character had not expressed discontent with how she and her friends lived their lives in *Valley Girl* through her changing linguistic patterns her growth as a character wouldn't have seemed important or necessary. In *Knives Out,* we see realistic linguistics in Marta's dialect expressing her hesitancy and uncertainty whereas these average attributes are not seen in the way the Thrombeys speak, affecting how the audience perceives the characters in relation to each other. In movies, audience perception is essential to a character's development and the message the audience takes with them after seeing the movie. This is important because these thoughts, feelings, and perceptions can be carried for a long time and allowed to influence someone's perception of the world, which in turn, affects their actions and behavior. We learn so much from watching others and that learning doesn't stop when something is fictional. Understanding how an aspect so important as dialects and accents in movies portray real life helps us better understand our and others' perceptions of the world. The correlation between linguistic factors and how characters are presented to us in movies versus how we feel about people in real life may not seem strong enough to seriously consider how this affects our outlook. However, since pop culture and how we choose to perceive things are such an important part of our daily life, the topic deserves consideration.

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