Perpetuating Accent Biases in Peter Jackson's The Lord of the Rings

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A character's accent can have a great deal of power over an audience's perceptions of that character. With this in mind, the author performed an in-depth study of each character's accent in Peter Jackson's The Lord of the Rings trilogy in order to determine the ability of accent to predict social power, distinction between protagonist and antagonist roles, and how often a character appears. The author concludes that accent was correlated with social hierarchy but not with protagonist versus antagonist role. In addition, accent can partially predict how often a character appears in the film.

INTRODUCTION

We likely spend as much time consuming media as we do food nowadays. Much of our understanding and perception of the world around us comes from our media intake. Included therein is exposure to accents and dialects other than our own; indeed, for most of us, it is the primary source of exposure. Moviemakers must deliberately decide how characters will act and how they will speak, and those decisions are not made arbitrarily. A character's accent can be a potent tool in catalyzing a desired reaction from the audience. The film trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*, directed by Peter Jackson, makes an excellent case study of this fact.

The following questions will be taken up with respect to Jackson's films: Why does each character speak the way he or she does? How is a given accent distributed among characters? Does this film series perpetuate existing prestige constructs with respect to accent? I hypothesize, first, that accents are correlated with social power, particularly Received Pronunciation (RP) with higher social power; second, that RP is correlated with protagonists and non-RP accents with antagonists; and third, that accent is correlated with how often characters appear, and in particular that RP is associated with characters who appear more often.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The term "accent" does not include lexical items and seldom includes grammatical structures; rather, it refers to phonological and intonational patterns that are characteristic of a particular group banded by region or social status (Deprez-Sims and Morris 2010). Often regional dialects are spoken of as distinct from social dialects, while regional accents can also be distinct from social accents, though less definitively. "Accents can be salient information detected

early in a social interaction… Because these linguistic patterns become associated with social and economic divisions between groups…accents play an important role in social categorization" (Deprez-Sims and Morris 2010).

Languages often have standard varieties, which are dialects that are considered prestigious. The standard serves as an ideal which speakers model their own speech after (in order to attain the prestige associated with that standard). Lippi-Green's *English with an Accent: Language, Ideology, and Discrimination in the United States* identifies critical aspects of how a dialect or, for our purposes, an accent becomes standardized. One chapter accuses public school systems of "justifying the continued push to deny linguistic variation and to assert the need to learn and use [the standard dialect]," saying that such action will "perpetuate its dominance and denigrate people's primary linguistic identity, by presenting it as a social handicap" (Butorac 2013). As PBS summarized, "[attitudes] toward accents are institutionalized in courts and perpetuated in the media and at work" (PBS: Public Broadcasting Service 2005). Of these three institutions, the least prominent in an individual's life is usually courts. Media and work therefore account for most of an accent's perpetuation as prestigious. This paper is an exploration of one film series as a subset of media at large.

In point of fact, no speculation is required about why each character has what accent: the moviemakers have already offered a reason. Andrew Jack is a dialect coach whose résumé boasts broadcasting on the BBC and coaching at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts. Jack was hired onto the crew of *The Lord of the Rings* to design and coach the constellation of accents that occur in the movie trilogy. On his website, Jack posts his accent decisions and justifications for them.

> [We] were looking for something timeless and rustic [for the Hobbits, so] we chose the speech of Gloucestershire which gave us everything we were looking for… Bilbo and Frodo Baggins are educated Hobbits and considered slightly different … Their accent [is] closer to RP or "Received Pronuncia-

tion."… The people of Gondor… spoke a more "antique language... more formal and more terse" (T1107). We chose RP (Received Pronunciation) to represent this way of speech… [The] people of Rohan … still spoke their ancestral tongue, which was "related both (more distantly) to the Common Speech and (very closely) to the former tongue of the northern Hobbits" (T1110). We started with the same accent as the Gondorians, (i.e. RP) but decided to make the accent rhotic and chose a light Irish R. This makes the speech of the Rohans sound more formal than the speech of the Hobbits and yet has a feature in common with them. When speaking English [the Elves] use RP, foregoing any sounds that might be perceived as modern or slovenly…. Gandalf and Saruman both use RP to give themselves an air of authority and communication power without any identifiable place of origin…. For the Orcs and the Uruk-hai it is the vocal quality rather than relying on a particular accent that reflects their evil characteristics, brutality and physical ugliness. (Jack 2004)

Jack's methodology and the sincerity of his explanations are clear and convincing. He crafts Middle-Earth into a believable soundscape, with neighboring nations speaking alike and social outsiders speaking differently. However, the end result remains that characters of high social prestige speak with RP and characters with lower social rank speak with other accents. Even his use of terms like "slovenly" for accents other than RP betrays his tacit bias.

METHODOLOGY

In order to investigate the distribution of accents throughout Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* films, a detailed study of each speaker was conducted. While watching the films, I catalogued every speaker whose dialogue was discernible and deliberate. Background chatter and shouting were not included. I classified each speaker by the criteria

of accent, number of scenes, and social prestige. Accents consisted of Received Pronunciation (RP), Gloucestershire (Gl), Cockney (Ck), Rhotic Received Pronunciation (RRP), Standard American (SA), and Scottish (Sc); number of scenes consisted of 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, or more than 5; and social power consisted of High Power Protagonist (HP), High Power Antagonist (HA), Medium Power Protagonist (MP), Medium Power Antagonist (MA), Low Power Protagonist (LP), and Low Power Antagonist (LA). This social power classification system is adapted from Mayfield's analysis of Disney movie dialects (Mayfield 2013). No consideration of grammar or lexis was made, so Gollum's schizophrenic utterances and Pippin's "elevensies" are not discussed. The appendix contains the full catalogue of speakers and their features.

Once all speakers were catalogued, their features were observed for obvious patterns. In particular, each of the three criteria was assessed with respect to each of the others, creating three sets of comparisons in total. Noteworthy findings are explained below.

RESULTS

HYPOTHESIS 1

The most obvious and meaningful findings pertain to the relationship between accent and social power. The following figure displays the number of speakers of each accent, with social power level indicated as well.

Speakers by Accent and Social Power Level
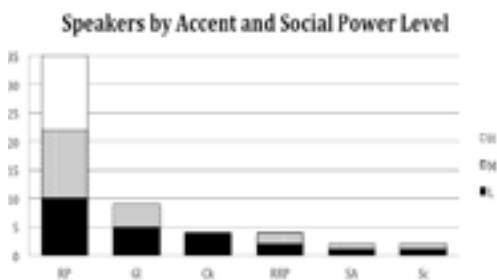
It is immediately apparent that speakers of RP far outnumber speakers of any other accent, even more than all of other accents combined (35 to 21, or 5:3). Indeed, there is much more to be learned by comparing RP speakers to non-RP speakers. The figures below demonstrate more clearly the distribution of social power level between RP and non-RP speakers, respectively.

RP Speakers by Social Power Level

Non-RP Speakers by Social Power Level
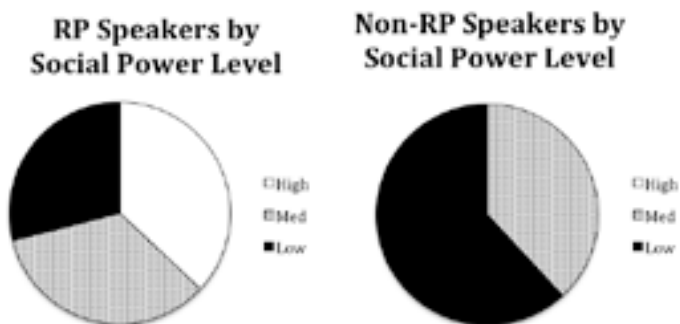
There are no High Power speakers of non-RP accents at all. Even ignoring High Power speakers, there are more Low Power speakers than Medium Power speakers among the non-RP accents but not in RP. One final chart clarifies in no uncertain terms the obvious relationship between accent and social power.

	RP	non-RP	Totals
High	100%	0%	13
Med	60%	40%	20
Low	40%	60%	23

These data results lead me to accept my first hypothesis and conclude that accent is correlated with social power, in particular RP with higher social power.

HYPOTHESIS 2

There is somewhat less to be said with respect to an accent as an indicator of protagonism/antagonism. The grouping of all non-RP accents above does not apply to the data here, as shown below.

The distributions are essentially identical. The data lead to a rejection of my second hypothesis that RP is correlated with protagonists and non-RP accents with antagonists. It is interesting to note, however, that all of the non-RP accents except Gloucestershire divide neatly along the protagonist/antagonist line.

	Protagonist	Antagonist	Totals
Gl	56%	44%	9
Ck	0%	100%	4
RRP	100%	0%	4
SA	0%	100%	2
Sc	100%	0%	2

This would suggest that the films portray characters with Cockney and Standard American accents as bad and Rhotic RP and Scottish accents as good. There are, however, so few speakers for each of these accents that the division may be purely incidental.

Coupland and Bishop administered a survey in Britain of perceived social prestige and social attractiveness of 34 accents, among which were Queen's English, or RP; Scottish; West Country, including Gloucestershire; and North American (Coupland and Bishop 2007). It is interesting to compare their findings to those of the present study.

	Coupland & Bishop	Jibson
1st	Queen's English	RP
2nd	Scottish	Gloucestershire
3rd	North American	Scottish
4th	West Country	Standard American

There is only one difference: West Country, or Gloucestershire, is much more prestigious in *The Lord of the Rings* than in modern Britain. It is interesting that the perception is so similar between Americans (for whom the films were made) and Britons (whose accents are used).

HYPOTHESIS 3

Finally, accent is compared against number of scenes in which a character appears. Once again, the non-RP accents are treated together. As there are only six characters altogether who appeared in 3, 4, or 5 scenes, the three amounts are also treated together and are represented in the chart as "3–5."

	RP	Non-RP	Totals
>5	80%	20%	20
3–5	100%	0%	6
2	50%	50%	12
1	39%	61%	18

These data are distributed in a somewhat odd yet definite pattern: the proportion of RP speakers increases among characters who appear in an increasing number of scenes, until reaching those in more than five scenes, whereupon the proportion of RP speakers decreases. The line that best fits is a negative quadratic equation (a frown-curve) with an R^2 (coefficient of determination) value of 0.75. Although more linear data could have been hoped for, the results encourage tentatively accepting my third hypothesis, that accent is correlated with characters' appearing less or more often, in particular RP with those who appear more often.

CONCLUSION

Rejection of each hypothesis has been treated already, but the findings will be repeated. First, accent was found to be correlated with social hierarchy, in particular Received Pronunciation (RP) with higher social power. Second, RP is not correlated with protagonist roles; likewise, non-RP accents are not correlated with antagonist roles. Third, accent is partially correlated with characters' appearing less or more often, in particular the RP accent with characters that appear more often in the film.

LIMITATIONS

Foremost among the limitations of this study is the admittedly broad (though not wholly arbitrary) Social Power classification criteria. For example, the characters Legolas and Gimli have no subordinates at any point in the film and make no independent decisions; however, they fell under the Medium Power classification because of their dispositions and prominence in the plot. Perhaps different results would arise with more rigorously defined criteria, such as the number of subordinates, the number of orders taken versus the number of orders given, and the like.

Similarly, the division between accents of characters was defined somewhat hazily. I am not a dialectologist and have had no formal training in recognizing or locating accents. Analysis of the same data by a trained dialectologist may produce more accurate delineation in accent.

Another disappointing aspect of this research was the omission of some characters from consideration, such as Treebeard, who was voiced by John Rhys-Davies, and the Witch King, who was voiced by Andy Serkis. Because these actors had already been represented (as Gimli and Sméagol, respectively) they were overlooked, and so the data here is incomplete. However, there is only one finding inconsistent with the analysis of the data set: Treebeard is a High Power, Scottish speaker.

Future work may well include the excluded characters in a more rigorous analysis of accent distribution, perhaps even enumerating lines uttered by or to each character rather than scenes in which each character appears. Similarly, an intriguing study would be an analysis either of other films directed by Peter Jackson or of films by other directors that are in similar cinematic genres. These would help determine whether this director or this niche perceive accents in a certain way. Above all, the film industry and the use of character accents at large should be studied in greater detail. Perhaps the ten top-grossing films of one year should be compared against those of another year a decade previous. These ideas all would help contribute to understanding the amount of influence Hollywood plays on the average person's perception of dialect prestige.

References

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APPENDIX

NAME	PRESTIGE	ACCENT	SCENES
Aragorn	HP	RP	>5
Arwen	MP	RP	>5
Bilbo	MP	RP	5
Boromir	MA	RP	>5
Butterbur	LP	Gl	1
Celeborn	HP	RP	2
Damrod	LP	RP	1
Deagol	LP	Gl	1
Denethor	MA	RP	5
Elrond	HP	RP	>5
Eomer	MP	RP	>5
Eowyn	MP	RP	>5
Faramir	MP	RP	>5
Farmer Maggot	LA	Gl	1
Freda	LP	RP	2
Frodo	HP	RP	>5
Galadriel	HP	RP	>5
Gamling	LP	RP	>5
Gandalf	HP	RP	>5
Gate Keeper	LA	Ck	2
Gimli	MP	Sc	>5
Gollum	HA	RP	>5
Gorbag	MA	Gl	2
Gothmog	HA	RP	4
Grima	HA	RP	5

Grimbold	LP	RRP	1
Grishnákh	LA	Ck	2
Haldir	MP	RP	>5
Háma	MP	RRP	2
Irolas	LP	RP	2
Isildur	HA	RP	1
King of the Dead	MA	RP	2
Legolas	MP	RP	>5
Lieutenant	LA	Ck	1
Lurtz	MA	SA	1
Madril	LP	RP	3
Man Flesh Uruk	LA	RP	1
Mauhúr	LA	RP	1
Merry	LP	Gl	>5
Morwen	MP	RRP	2
Odo Proudfoot	LP	Gl	1
Orc commander	MA	Gl	1
Orc Overseer	LA	RP	2
Pippin	LP	Sc	>5
Ringwraith	HA	RP	1
Rohan marshall	LP	RRP	1
Sam	MP	Gl	>5
Saruman	HA	RP	>5
Sauron	HA	RP	4
Scared Hobit	LP	RP	1
Shagrat	MA	Gl	2
Sharku	LA	RP	1
Snaga	LA	Ck	1