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A Sociolinguistic Perspective on Accents and Popular
Cinema: the Variety of English Accents in *Game of
Thrones*, *Star Wars* and the Villains in Hollywood Films

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RESUMEN

Este trabajo de fin de grado muestra cómo las diferentes formas de hablar de los personajes en las películas están totalmente estudiadas y justificadas para exponer el argumento y características de las mismas. Además, tiene como finalidad demostrar la relación existente entre la identidad y entorno de cada individuo y el habla de estos personajes gracias a diversas películas y series, en concreto, los personajes de *Juego de Tronos*, la saga de *La Guerra de las Galaxias* y los villanos en las películas de Hollywood. Los resultados confirman que los factores extralingüísticos influyen de manera directa en la forma de hablar de los personajes, por lo que el espectador puede deducir y concluir el papel de cada uno en la película sólo por el acento que ese personaje tenga.

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1. Introduction

This dissertation examines the different accents and varieties of English that are used in the TV series *Game of Thrones*, the films of the cinematic universe of *Star Wars* and the villains of Hollywood films. My main aim is to analyse whether these varieties of English correlate with some of the characters' traits or with the plot of these audiovisual examples and how this may affect the attitude and the point of view of the audience.

This approach to the study of the use of English accents in popular culture can be considered to display a sociolinguistic nature. The main reason is that language plays an important role in our society. It is a powerful means of expressing and perceiving the identity of a person (Dobrow and Gidney, 1998). That is to say, our manner of speaking or language somehow displays our own age, ethnicity, gender, origin, race, social class, namely, our background. Thanks to it, people may be able to distinguish members of their own or other communities. As discussed later, this is the case, for example, with Cersei Lannister (*Game of Thrones*), a sophisticated and determined leader from the ruling elite that shows an upper-class RP, whereas Jon Snow's accent exhibits a Northern accent as a masculine and grown-up warrior. In fact, according to Ferdinand de Saussure (2011), language is a social fact; thus, it is employed as a means of communication in order to form groups or communities as well as be able to communicate between them (p. 6). That is the reason why language varies from one place to another (Bruti and Vignozzi, 2016). This change is the result of the social and historical circumstances of each place. Therefore, as there is a close relationship between these circumstances and language variation, many linguists, following the steps of William Labov, decided in the 1960s to study living local speeches so as to determine the reasons and factors influencing language (Mesthrie, Swann, Deumert, & Leap, 2000, p.3).

This relatively young field of study is nowadays called sociolinguistics. Hudson (1980) defines sociolinguistics as 'the study of language in relation to society' (p. 1), that is, the aim

of sociolinguistics is to examine how language is used and perceived in society as well as how language varies between communities because of some social variables as the ethnicity or socioeconomic status of its speakers (Moltu, 2014). This belief was first introduced by the sociolinguist William Labov in his work *The social stratification of English in New York City* (1966), in which he states that societal factors directly influence our manner of speaking, likewise the development of language variation cannot be considered without regarding the society in which this language occurs (Labov, 1972, p. 3). Some years later the well-known linguist Peter Trudgill investigated this topic concluding that language is ‘a social and cultural phenomenon’ (Trudgill, 2000, p. 21), in other words, it is impossible to analyse language - regarding speakers’ vocabulary, lexical structure or accent - without taking into account the society in which they live (Sonnesyn, 2011).

Moreover, this close relationship may have a social meaning due to the fact that depending on your speech or accent, people are going to show different attitudes towards you. As mentioned below, Littlefinger’s variable, even adaptable accent portrays him as an unreliable and selfish person. That is to say, listeners might make inferences about your manner of speaking based on stereotypes or prejudices that are attributed to that accent or variety (Sonnesyn, 2011). In order to realise how an accent, a dialect or a variety are perceived by others, it is important to know first the linguistic meaning and distinction of these terms. On the one hand, an accent is only the manner of pronouncing a language indicating in this way distinctive features of people belonging to a specific place, social class, gender or level of education (Wells, 1988, p. 1; Hughes and Trudgill, 1996, p. 9). On the other hand, the term dialect refers to ‘varieties distinguished from each other by differences of grammar and vocabulary’ (Hughes and Trudgill, 1996, p. 9). It is somehow a sub-variety of that single language. While the most renowned English accent is the so-called Received Pronunciation of RP, the dialect that is commonly taught to students is known as Standard English. However,

many linguists reject the term dialect because of the negative attitudes that this term is usually associated with (Meyerhoff, 2011). However, there is a third term that is commonly used among linguists owing to its relatively neutral connotations. The concept of variety concerns both accent and dialect, in other words, it regards language itself avoiding then the problem concerning the distinction existing between both terms (Meyerhoff, 2011). As it has been previously mentioned, different varieties or accents of a specific language may have a close relationship with the environment in which that language takes place. Therefore, popular culture has a considerable impact on society. Popular culture is a complex term to define but it can be broadly explained as the well-liked cultural and traditional beliefs, customs and practices of a particular society (Crossman, 2019). Crossman (2019) continues arguing that this culture is reflected by some means that are consumed by people in a given society, some of them are television, art, literature, music or films. Through this media, different beliefs, ideas or even attitudes are communicated to audiences. Thus, people might shape their attitudes, personalities and stereotypes by looking at them.

2. Method

In order to carry out the present study, I examined several characters from a number of audiovisual genres, in particular the whole eight seasons of the television series *Game of Thrones*, the nine films of the cinematic universe of *Star Wars*, and 13 Hollywood films such as *Die Hard*, *The Silence of the Lambs* or *The Patriot*. The films have all been watched in their entirety while noting down the main features and characteristics of the different accents of the characters. A total of 55 characters have been analysed regarding their accent and character traits. These characters have been chosen regarding the amount of screen time of each of them as well as their amount of speech so as to have sufficient evidence for the results. This analysis has only been auditory, which may have a drawback, specifically, subjectivity, due to the fact

that most researchers in this area seem to have presented their own thoughts and conclusions just taking into account their own criteria.

3. Results

3.1. *Game of Thrones*

The internationally acclaimed show *Game of Thrones* is an American fantasy drama television series created by David Benioff and Daniel B. Weiss in 2011. It is based on the still unfinished fantasy saga of *A Song of Ice and Fire* written by George R. R. Martin. The storyline, both of the television series and the books, is set in the fictional continents called Westeros and Essos. There, several families or houses vie for the Iron Throne and consequently for the control and ruling of the whole Westeros. Each of these houses belongs to one area of Westeros, so the characters belonging to a specific geographical area usually tend to have the same language, accent, traditions and culture. In addition, this fictional world and the United Kingdom have several similarities, not only regarding the geographical disposition, but also the historical one, in fact, the inspiration of the original author was the English Wars of Roses (Rebane, 2019, p. 176). This suggests a correlation between the distribution of accents in Britain and in Westeros. In fact, even the division between Northern and Southern accents in Westeros is similar to the one of the British Isles (Lien, 2016). According to the speech coach John Fleming (2017), accents “have separated the seven kingdoms, to a degree, by dialect”. It has to be taken into account the fact that the majority of actors and actresses are doing a different accent than their native natural one, that is to say, many characters required a particular accent that actors do not actually have. The following analysis is going to deal with the geographical location of the key characters of *Game of Thrones* in detail as well as their accents and some of their non-linguistic variables following an organised pattern so as to reach the expected conclusions.

One of the most recognised and loved Houses of *Game of Thrones* is without a doubt the Stark family. This House is seated in the Northern parts of Westeros at Winterfell. As it is in the North, the audience may suppose that Stark characters are going to speak with a Northern English accent; however, this is not completely accurate because the members of the family speak with two different English accents (Lien, 2016, p. 29). In the one hand, Eddard Stark, Robb and Jon Snow speak with a Northern accent, in particular, with a Yorkshire accent (Taylor, 2017; Rebane, 2019, p. 177). Yorkshire accent is mainly distinguished from the southern accent by two main features: the absence of the FOOT-STRUT split, i.e. the lack of difference between vowels /ʊ/ and /ʌ/; and the absence of BATH broadening, i.e. the use of the vowel /æ/ in words with /ɑ:/ (Wells, 1989, p. 351). This accent has not only being chosen because of their geographical position in Westeros, but also because of some of their character traits. As Eddard's accent is considered to be a prestige accent (Eddard is the head of House Stark, Lord of Winterfell, and Warden of the North), Lien (2016) points out that his northern accent perfectly reflects the position and power of these characters, especially of Eddard (p. 34). His northern accent highlights his determination, honesty, heroism and masculinity, considering masculinity as his military skills and achievements (Lien, 2016, p. 34; Rebane, 2019, p. 177; Taylor, 2017). This masculinity is also present in Robb and Jon due to the fact that "a boy is considered a man as soon as he fights" (Lien, 2016, p. 34); in fact, both show strength by becoming trained fighters throughout the passing of seasons. On the other hand, Catelyn, Arya, Sansa, Bran and Rickon Stark speak with a Standard Southern British English (SSBE) (Lien, 2016, p. 29). In the case of Catelyn, she was born in Riverrun, in the South of Westeros; therefore, her accent depicts her background as she does not want to leave behind her origins (Meyerhoff, 2011, p. 166). This is not the case of her children because all of them were raised in Winterfell; however, she tried her little children to speak posh, with a southern accent (Taylor, 2017). The case of Bran and Rickon differs from the one of their older brothers

because they are considerably younger, so they are not considered fully-grown men nor masculine yet (Lien, 2016, p. 36). In addition, a special case is Theon Greyjoy due to the fact that he is not originally from the North - he is from the Iron Island, situated in the Western part of Westeros - but, as he lived there many years as the ward of the Starks, his accent is a Northern English one (Line, 2016. p. 32).

Another of the most well-known families is the House Lannister. This House is seated in the Southwest of Westeros, with its capital at Casterly Rock. The members of this family are the richest and most powerful ones in the whole continent, in fact, the king of Westeros is a Lannister in almost all the seasons. The family is formed by Tywin and his three children Jaime, Cersei and Tyrion. All of them speak with an RP (Received Pronunciation) accent, thus this reflects the geographical position of their territory in the South (Line, 2016, p. 30). RP is usually connected to the high status and sophistication that Lannisters actually demonstrate in the series (Rebane, 2019, p. 179). It is mainly characterised by a lack of rhoticity, a distinction between clear [l] and dark [ɫ] and the formation of syllabic consonants (Hughes and Trudgill, 1996, p. 35; Wells, 1989, p. 286). In this way, Jaime Lannister speaks with an RP accent because he is a self-confident and fierce fighter (Howard and Marsh, 1979). Moreover, Howard and Marsh (1979) assert that RP women are considered more masculine and androgynous than females with any other accent. Hence, Cersei meets their perception because she is a self-reliant, determined and controlling leader that even conspires at the beginning against his husband, the king (Line, 2016, p. 37). Furthermore, Tyrion Lannister proves a peculiar case because, despite speaking with an RP accent as his family, he displays ‘noticeable American slips’ (Line, 2016, p. 42). This character is portrayed by the American actor Peter Dinklage, so his imposed accent might be the reason of these slips. However, Lien (2016) also states that this distinction of accent may be because of his condition as a dwarf, that is to say, he is alienated because he is somehow not part of the expectations and perceptions of mainstream society (p. 42-43).

The third key family is the House Baratheon, at least in the first half of the series. This House presents several accents in spite of the fact that its members should speak with a SSBE accent because it is seated in the South of Westeros. This is only the case of Renly and Stannis Baratheon, the first one uses RP whereas the second one needs further comments. According to Taylor (2017), Stannis' accent is the working-class accent of London but with a twist, because he even shares the general characteristics of Cockney. This accent is normally regarded as mediocre and low in attractiveness; thus, this could be the case of Stannis because he is viewed as an obscure, cruel and resentful character that even kills his own daughter in cold blood (Rebane, 2019, p. 178). His accent is characterised by the use of the glottal stop, non-rhoticity and the usage of the happy [ɪ] rather than [i] (Wells, 1989, p. 302-303; Hughes and Trudgill, 1996, p. 70-71). Nevertheless, the major representation of this House is Robert Baratheon. He starts the first season being the king of the seven kingdoms. Geographically, he should speak SSBE as his brothers; however, he speaks with a Northern accent, in particular, a Yorkshire accent as does his old friend Eddard Stark (Rebane, 2019, p. 178; Line, 2016, p. 30). Rebane (2019) argues that the reason for this is that their similar accents reflect their shared past as both were raised in the Vale, which is in the North of Westeros (p. 178). His accent also exhibits his masculine traits because he likes to hunt and to fight, pastimes stereotypically associated with men (Trudgill, 1983). Moreover, Lien (2016) claims that he is outside the court because he is the usurper that led the rebellion against the previous Targaryen king and that is why he speaks with another accent than the one of the court in King's Landing (p. 41). Finally, even though Sir Davos Seaworth is not a member of this House, he is part of the service of Stannis Baratheon. His accent is rather distinctive because he is the only character that speaks with a Geordie accent in the whole series (Taylor, 2017). Geordie accent is distinguished by a close happy vowel [ɪ], a glottal realization [ʔ], the use of the clear [ɪ] in all positions and the merging of /ɜ:/ with /ɔ:/ vowels (Wells, 1989, p. 374-376). This is a special case because there

is not an accurate demonstration for this accent choice because he was born and raised in the South; however, Rebane (2019) declares that it is “apparently deployed solely to highlight his moral integrity” (p. 177). However, Davos became a sailor at a very young age so as to escape from Flea Bottom, one of the poorest slums in the South. Therefore, as he has spent most of his life travelling across the Narrow Sea, his accent would have been influenced by other sailors. In fact, Geordie accent is traditionally associated with working class sailors, boats and the sea.

The last powerful family in *Game of Thrones* is the House Targaryen. As Robert Baratheon’s rebellion killed most of the family, it is only formed by two members that had to flee into exile to another continent, Essos. Both of them, Daenerys and Viserys, speak with an RP accent. Geographically, their accents fit into the place where both were born, the Southeast of Westeros; however, Daenerys has passed most of her time at Essos, so she would have had to have an accent of that place (Lien, 2016, p. 31; Rebane, 2019, p. 179). Lien (2016) defends that the reason for this might be the influence that her older brother has on her, he manipulates and controls her life as he pleases (p. 31). Moreover, she is also another example of the androgynous female of Howard and Marsh (1979)’s concept because she ends being a self-confident, strong and determined leader that they associate with male behaviour (p. 37).

In this fictional world, there are not only British accents, in fact, there are some characters that do have a foreign accent or what Taylor (2017) describes as ‘vaguely Mediterranean’. The majority of them are from Essos, the ‘foreign’ continent in *Game of Thrones*. Some representative characters of this are the Red Priestess Melisandre, Tyrion’s lover Shae and the many-faced assassin Jaqen H’Ghar. These marked accents might be applied because of their obscurity and enigmatic personality, some of them even control life and death by using a supernatural power (Rebane, 2019, p. 183). First of all, Melisandre speaks with a Dutch accent, thus the reason of her exotic accent may be either the Dutch origin of the actress

Carice van Houten or the fact that Melisandre is from Asshai, a town far from Westeros (Taylor, 2017). Moreover, Shae and Jaqen speak with a German accent due to the fact that both are from Braavos' area in Essos. They are regarded as untrustworthy, evil and self-interested, as non-native English accented speakers are traditionally perceived by natives (Rebane, 2019, p. 81). Taylor (2017) asserts that their strong foreign varieties are somehow a tribute to Westeros' history as well as to Britain's historical Germanic invasions. Furthermore, there is another character in the series that speaks with a foreign accent, but, in this case, he is from Westeros. Oberyn Martell belongs to Dorne, the South of the Seven Kingdoms. He is the typical warrior Latin lover that speaks with a Hispanic accent (Robinson, 2014). Robinson praises and believes that Dornish characters as Oberyn are examples of "cultural diversity" (2014). However, in spite of challenging prejudices because of his honor, courage and loyalty, he ends falling into stereotypes as he dies in an incautious and uncontrolled manner (Rebane, 2019, p. 182).

The last key character I want to mention is Petyr Baelish, also called Littlefinger. He does not belong to any House, in fact, he is known for his constant manipulations and betrayals. This is exhibited in his accent, it literally wanders, that is to say, in the first season he starts speaking with a London accent, close to RP, and by the last seasons he actually speaks with a 'half English, half Irish accent' (Taylor, 2017; Fleming, 2017). Aidan Gillen, the actor that portrays Littlefinger, has acknowledged in an interview that he has done that intentionally because his character is not fixed, he pretends to be someone he is not, thus his accent is influenced by the environment in which he lives at each time (Mellor, 2017). As Rebane (2019) claims, Littlefinger's accent not only confounds other protagonists in the series, but also the audience and their linguistic expectations (p. 180).

3.2. *Star Wars*

Star Wars is one of the most popular and successful media franchises in film history. This fictional universe is based on an American space-opera saga created by George Lucas in the 1970s. This saga, the so-called Skywalker saga, is composed by three trilogies. The original *Star Wars* trilogy is formed by *Episode IV: A New Hope* (1977), *Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) and *Episode VI: Return of the Jedi* (1983); it follows Luke Skywalker's quest to become a Jedi and his struggle with the evil Galactic Empire, headed by Darth Vader. The prequel trilogy is composed by *Episode I: The Phantom Menace* (1999), *Episode II: Attack of the Clones* (2002) and *Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* (2005); it is focused on the rising and transformation of the Jedi Anakin Skywalker into the Sith Darth Vader 32 years before the original trilogy. Finally, the sequel trilogy consists of *Episode VII: The Force Awakens* (2015), *Episode VIII: The Last Jedi* (2017) and *Episode IX: The Rise of Skywalker* (2019); it happens 30 years after the sixth episode and follows the fight between the Force, formed by Rey and the Resistance, and the First Order, commanded by Kylo Ren, the son of Han Solo and Leia Skywalker.

These storylines are set in a fictional galaxy far, far away. The lingua franca that all the characters use is Galactic Basic, which corresponds to the English language in our society. Accents in *Star Wars* are not a coincidence, in fact, they display a character's power, political status and background (Chan, 2015). Throughout all the films, the audience may appreciate several varieties of English, but there are two accents that clearly stand out: Received Pronunciation and General American. The distinction between these two accents definitely helps to classify the different characters into the dichotomy between villains and heroes, the bad guys vs. the good guys, them vs. us, and between the Empire and the Rebels (Holmes, 2018).

On the one hand, Received Pronunciation (RP) is spoken by those in power, that is to say, those characters associated with a high economic and political status that were usually born in Coruscant (Yglesias, 2015). This accent is characterised by the distinction between clear [l] and dark [ɫ], the lack of rhoticity and the distinction between vowels in words as FOOT-STRUT and TRAP-BATH (Hughes and Trudgill, 1996, p. 35-36). As it has been already mentioned, Received Pronunciation is spoken by the high classes of this fictional galaxy, in particular, by those characters that belong to the Inner Core planets of this galaxy (Brad, 2020; Davis, 2017). They have a British accent in contrast to those who were born outside them, which have an American accent. RP is also known in the Star Wars universe as the Coruscanti dialect of Galactic Basic, in fact, it is even considered a superior accent used by the Imperials (Holmes, 2018; Yglesias, 2015). The most renowned characters with a Coruscanti or RP accent are the Jedi knights Obi-Wan Kenobi, Qui-Gon Jinn and Rey, and the members of the Galactic Empire Darth Vader, Grand Moff Tarkin and Emperor Palpatine (Andersson, 2010, p. 13). According to Holmes (2018), the director of *Episode V*, Irvin Kershner, deliberately chose British actors so as to represent the Galactic Empire paralleling the Imperial Britain of the American Revolution, in other words, he wanted to portray that Americans are always the good guys and British people the bad guys through American eyes.

On the other hand, General American is mainly used by those characters that were born in the remote planets of The Core, also known as the commoners (Chan, 2015; Yglesias, 2015). General American is the main English accent of the United States and it is presented as a rhotic accent characterised by the use of /æ/ in BATH words and the use of open /ɛ/ rather than British /e/ (Wells, 1990, p. 470, 477 and 485). Some of the characters that display an American accent are Yoda, Queen Amidala, Princess Leia, Master Windu, Han Solo, Luke Skywalker, Finn, Poe Dameron and Anakin Skywalker (Andersson, 2010, p. 14). All these characters are part of the Rebels, that is to say, they are the heroes of this story. However, according to Williams (1999),

this is not totally true due to the fact that accents do not display the morality of the characters, but their social class. For instance, Finn is a mere stormtrooper at the beginning of *Episode VII*, that is why he speaks with an American variety, in fact, the actor that portrays this characters, John Boyega, is actually British so he had to change it so as to follow the rules and requirements imposed by George Lucas (Holmes, 2018; Chan, 2015).

Nevertheless, there are two characters that speak with both accents (RP and GA) depending on the situation and who they are talking to, these are Queen Padme Amidala and Princess Leia Skywalker. In spite of their political power, both tend to speak in an American accent when addressing the Rebels and Jedis, but, when they are talking to an Imperial officer, they prefer using a British accent (Chan, 2015). In the case of Padme, she is clearly influenced by the manner of speaking of others and, as she controls both varieties, she is able to easily swift from one into another in order to be in control of every situation (Brad, 2020). Additionally, in the case of Leia, there is a huge controversy among the fans of the saga. She only uses a British accent when addressing Grand Moff Tarkin on the Death Star in *Episode IV* (R. Davis, 2017; Child, 2016). Carrie Fisher, the actress behind Leia, has referenced this in many interviews; she regrets doing that shifting accent once but she claims that she was very young and consequently influenced by Peter Cushing, the actor portraying Tarkin (Breznican, 2016). Thus, it was a way of mocking him, his accent and the Galactic Empire as a way of showing that she was not intimidated by them (Brad, 2020).

Similar to these changes, Anakin Skywalker's accent is an interesting and curious example when he becomes Darth Vader. The Jedi Anakin was a white slave in Tatooine, a planet outside of The Core, until Qui-Gon freed him from slavery and trained him, that is the reason for his American accent (Chan, 2015). However, his accent radically swifts when Anakin becomes the Sith lord Darth Vader in *Episode III* because of Palpatine's manipulation. From this point forward, Darth Vader has a British accent, he is now part of the Empire as well

as of the Dark Side of the Force, thus his accent is totally justified. Many experts have exposed that his accent has been clearly influenced by his new position of power as he becomes the right hand of Emperor Palpatine (Chan, 2015). However, some other experts argue that ‘due to his vocal cords being damaged, this is the voice [American accent] programmed for him to speak with’ (Brad, 2020).

Furthermore, there is an intense discussion about Rey’s character that has already come to an end a few months ago thanks to *Episode IX*. Since *Episode VII* was released, the Star Wars audience has been constantly trying to get an answer to the mystery around Rey’s background. Rey is a mysterious desert scavenger with unknown parents in Jakku, a planet outside of the Core, who is enormously attracted by the Force. She speaks with an RP accent despite the audience’s expectations (Truffaut-Wong, 2016). Therefore, many people has theorised over the years about her origin and background, that is to say, about the reason for her British accent. Her accent suggests that she is a descendant either from a family with power or from a family from the planet Coruscant, or at least with the Coruscanti dialect (Chan, 2015; Truffaut-Wong, 2016). Thus, it is a sign of her lineage and family life. Some people have speculated that she was the daughter of Han Solo and Leia Skywalker, the daughter of Luke Skywalker and an unknown mother who spoke the Coruscanti dialect, or the daughter of Obi-Wan Kenobi because he has a British accent too, or even the daughter of Jyn Erso, the protagonist of the spin-off *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* (2016) (Chan, 2015; Yglesias, 2015; R. Davis, 2017; Truffaut-Wong, 2016). However, in the last film of Star Wars, *Episode IX*, this mystery has been eventually solved. Rey is the granddaughter of Darth Sidious, also known as Emperor Palpatine, the most powerful figure of the Galactic Empire. That is the reason for her British accent as well as for the fact that she is somehow pulled by the dark side of the Force (R. Davis, 2017).

In spite of the fact that the central characters of the *Star Wars* trilogies speak either American or British English, there is also a tendency for minor characters to speak with accents from minority groups (S. Davis, 2017). The majority of these supporting characters are in fact aliens, that is, strange and exotic creatures that differ from the protagonists not only audibly but also physically (Brode and Deyneka, 2012, p. 18-19). For instance, Jar Jar Binks and his tribal society, the Gungans, have a sort of Caribbean accent, in fact, some experts even argue that it is a Jamaican accent (Andersson, 2010, p. 14; Brode and Deyneka, 2012, p. 18). The major features of Jamaican English are the h-dropping, the use of clear /l/ in all environments, the th-stopping and cluster reductions (Wells, 1990, p. 575). According to Brode and Deyneka (2012) Jar Jar Binks' ears are similar to dreadlocks, commonly associated with Jamaican culture, and he is also an outcast with no clear direction, a stereotype displaying Jamaicans' laziness (p. 18). Thus, his speech may be justified owing to these two reasons. Moreover, the Neimoidians, another group involved in the Trade Federation, are Thai speakers of English (Cronin, 2008). Neimoidians are incredibly good businessmen as the stereotypical image of Asian people; and as they only use English as their lingua franca, they should have a foreign accent as the one they actually have (Cronin, 2008). However, all these accents from minority groups have caused many accusations of racism in *Star Wars* movies along the years (Brode and Deyneka, 2012, p. 18-21). It is difficult not to play into stereotypes when different accents and dialects appear on screen. In spite of the fact that all these characters are supporting ones, that is, treated as 'the other', the director tried to incorporate a foreign protagonist in one of the new spin-offs, specifically, in *Rogue One*, in order to soothe racist critics (S. Davis, 2017). Captain Cassian Andor is the male protagonist of *Rogue One*, the director himself decided that the actor should keep his real Mexican accent (Cassian is played by the Mexican actor Diego Luna) (S. Davis, 2017; Latimer, 2017). This has been the only time in the *Star Wars* universe that a leading character speaks with another accent that is neither American nor British.

3.3. Villains in Hollywood films

As it has been previously stated, our manner of speaking and the environment in which we live are closely related, that is, one influence the other and vice versa. But what should be clear is that ‘a basic tenet of sociolinguistics is that language displays its speakers’ identity’ (Coulmas, 2005, p. 171). This marker of identity can be questioned and analysed positively and negatively depending on stereotypes, in other words, opinions that people have towards dialect performances (Meyerhoff, 2011, p. 26; Coulmas, 2005, p. 173). Hence, people cherishes and loves or rejects and detests some accents and thus some identities, that is, people’s race, gender, origin, economic status, ideology or religion (Lippi-Green, 1994, p. 165; Moltu, 2014, p. 7). Popular cinema plays a huge role in entertaining but also in constructing and reaffirming stereotypes. By watching Hollywood films and television, people are unconsciously shaping their perceptions and prejudices, that is, they might associate some characteristics and beliefs with specific groups of people (Dobrow and Gidney, 1998, p. 106; Lippi-Green, 1997, p. 85).

In terms of dialect, American movie audiences have noticed throughout the years that there is a tendency in American films to depict the villain, the ‘bad guy’, with a foreign accent, notably with a British accent. This clearly exhibits the close love-hate relationship between the United States and the United Kingdom; American people are always the good ones, no matter how far from reality could be that belief (Luu, 2017). In Lippi-Green’s acclaimed study of accents in films (1997), she asserts that two-thirds of the villains in movies are portrayed with non-American accents (p. 117). This is definitely not accidental. The prestige accent of villainy par excellence is Received Pronunciation, also known as the Queen’s English or BBC English. According to Dobrow and Gidney (1998), speakers of British English ‘are portrayed dichotomously as either the epitome of refinement and elegance or as the embodiment of effete evil’ (p. 117). Received Pronunciation is usually evaluated by non-RP speakers as more educated, wealthier, more intelligent, more attractive and more sophisticated (Luu, 2017;

Dobrow and Gidney, 2017, p. 110). But at the same time, this posh accent is also seen as ‘less trustworthy, kind, sincere, and friendly’ (Luu, 2017) as well as more ambitious and arrogant than speakers of other varieties of English (Moltu, 2014, p. 12). This seems to be the perfect match for a villain.

This malevolent and ruthless posh accent might be constantly heard in numerous films. Some of these characters include the unmistakable serial killer Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), played by Anthony Hopkins; the psychopath Colonel Tavington in *The Patriot* (2000), played by Jason Isaacs; Sir Ian McKellen as Magneto in the *X-Men* film series; the multiple rapist and murderer Archibald Cunningham in *Rob Roy* (1995), played by Tim Roth; and, as it has been analysed before, the whole Galactic Empire in *Star Wars* films, for instance, Peter Cushing as Grand Moff Tarkin or James Earl Jones as Darth Vader (Norman, 2010; Bates, 2017). What is more, there are some British actors and actresses that have played different villains in many films, for example, the famous actors Alan Rickman and Christopher Lee. The former one has played the intimidating and menacing Sheriff of Nottingham in *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* (1991), the evil Elliot Marston in the western film *Quigley Down Under* (1990) and the terrorist Hans Gruber in *Die Hard* (1988) (even though he has some recurrent features of German accent) (Norman, 2010). The second one has played many evil characters such as Count Dooku in the *Star Wars* prequel and the villainous Saruman in *The Lord of the Rings* film trilogy (Bates, 2017). This tendency is also present in Disney films, in fact, villains as Shere Khan in *The Jungle Book* (1967) or Scar, the lion of the dark side, in *The Lion King* (1994) have British accents, they are played by George Sanders and Jeremy Irons, respectively (Norman, 2010; Schreiber, 2017; Fattal, 2018).

There are three possible explanations for this phenomenon. First of all, the difference between American and British accents recalls colonial times when the United Kingdom colonised and took power of part of the territory of the future United States (Norman, 2010).

Throughout the centuries, both world powers have had a close relationship of rivalry and opposition but also of agreement and respect. Since then, the United States has always had a ‘mild inferiority complex about their own dialects compared to British English’ (Luu, 2017), so they have to somehow illustrate this so as not to feel insecure or inferior to England in this aspect. This is related with the second explanation which is that they sound different, they are considered ‘the other’, the foreigner, a deviation from the American norm; so casting British or foreign people as the evil character might be completely justified (Lane, 2019; Fattal, 2018; Abi, 2017; Romm, 2017). Finally, the last reason may be Standard Language Ideology, that is to say, the fact that standard varieties of English are regarded as superior than non-standard ones because there is supposedly an ideal language or accent, in this case, General American (Bates, 2017; Luu, 2017). They are considered to have no accent, so people from other countries may feel subjugated or discriminated due to their manner of speaking (Romm, 2017; Schreiber, 2017).

This phenomenon has also its consequences, it has a direct impact on people’s attitudes and prejudices toward difference and other human beings. It can be claimed that audiences use TV as the main source of information since the earliest stages of life. Thanks to it, we can appreciate other ethnicities and cultures as well as accents and identities (Fattal, 2018). Thus, this depiction of British English speakers as the evil characters of the story may have negative consequences for children and adults (Luu, 2017). Linguistic Chi Luu claims that because of this pattern, ‘we can predict social and personal traits about a person, simply by the accent they use’ (2017). Unconsciously, we tend to associate certain traits and stereotypes to specific groups of people, or even ethnicities. Consequently, we prejudge others by their manner of speaking without taking into account reality, resulting in clear signs of discrimination (Luu, 2017). If these shows depicted diversity instead of discrimination, people would start not having wrong or negative perceptions of other groups. Television shows and films should be

not only a form of entertainment, but a way of learning about diversity and other unknown cultures.

Nevertheless, many British actors and actresses feel offended and even humiliated because of this depiction. One of these actresses is the Academy winner Helen Mirren who criticized this stereotype in an interview in Los Angeles:

‘I think it is rather unfortunate that the villain in every movie is always British. We are such an easy target that they can comfortably make the Brits the villains. It is just nice to say we are not snooty, stuck up, malevolent, malignant creatures as we are so often portrayed. We are actually kind of cool and hip’ (Norman, 2010, para. 10 & 14).

British people are also fairly annoyed with this phenomenon, what is more, a 28% of British people have felt that they have been discriminated owing to their accent (Arger, 2017). However, this stereotype seems to have come to an end, for instance, the new villain in the new superhero film *Deadpool* has a Cockney accent (Bater, 2017). Therefore, many people have started questioning what happened before, either the casting of British people because of the stereotype or the stereotype because of British villains in Hollywood films. Nobody knows the answer of it but what should be clear is that both clearly influence each other.

4. Conclusion

The main aim of this dissertation was to demonstrate whether the language variety used by each individual is somehow related to his or her personality and background. In other words, whether the English accent spoken by a character in a film is correlated with some of his or her character traits or even with the whole plot. Moreover, another objective was to prove how this accent shapes the attitude and point of view of the audience when watching those characters. In order to illustrate that, a total of 55 characters from different films and TV series have been analysed and categorised depending on their accents and linguistic factors as well the extralinguistic factors surrounding them. These audiovisual examples from which these

characters have been analysed are *Game of Thrones*, the saga of *Star Wars* and several Hollywood films.

It can be concluded that accents in films and societal factors are definitely interconnected. Lippi-Green (1994) summarises this by stating that ‘the way we talk, whether it is a life choice or an immutable characteristic, is akin to other attributes of the self’ (p. 191). Hence, accents are a reflection of society as well as of the stereotypes and attitudes associated with those accents and varieties of English. At the same time, language attitudes are also inferred from language variation (i.e. accents). Therefore, a character with a specific accent has a clear impact on the audience, so it can be stated that linguistic stereotypes are undeniably used in modern cinema.

First of all, the series *Game of Thrones* shows that the accent of each character or House in this case displays the geographical location of that character or family. Following the steps of fantasy films, its characters use a regional accent from the British Isles although the setting is fictional. The dialect used in each case helps to understand better the plot as well as the relationships between the huge amount of characters. Secondly, the *Star Wars* saga goes a step further due to the fact that divides the characters into heroes and villains just by their accent. By speaking British English or American English, the audience knows the status of that character as well as its allies and enemies. It can be said that accents are used so as to build the characters. Finally, this distinction between good and bad characters is also reflected in Hollywood films due to the fact that British English or RP is mainly spoken by the villains of those movies. This radically shapes the attitude of the audience as well as distorts reality playing into false stereotypes. Thus, the accent of a character not only exhibits its personality but also the traditional implications of that variety for the audience.

This analysis certainly has its limitations because it may be fairly subjective. This issue of subjectivity is the main weakness of this study due to the fact that it is based on researchers

and critics' opinions and investigations, so the final results are proved thanks to their respective analyses. However, the structure and distribution of accents and characters have followed my own criteria and judgement.

The present study has demonstrated that language attitudes are still present in modern cinema. Therefore, there is a correlation between how the characters are presented, their respective accents and the society in which they are involved.

This analysis and investigation towards language variation and language attitudes might be helpful for future educational research. Schools and universities throughout the world usually teach standard varieties of English without taking into consideration that this language is also spoken in many other countries and parts of the world. Therefore, teachers may have to take this type of study and similar ones into account in order to have a closer approach to the English language and reality. A diversity of accents and dialects should be present in class by watching some of these films and series. Thanks to that, people from all over the world would not have a racist approach to language variation but an informed and understanding one and, at the same time, they would be able to recognise other social identities and cultures. To conclude, this study is a reflection of life since accents depict our own identity and background.

5. List of References

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