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A Scottish Shrek: The Dialectal Impact on Developing Children

A classic among children and adults alike, Dreamworks Studios' *Shrek* is known for its overwhelmingly positive messaging and rejection of traditional damaging fairy tale tropes, namely that one can only find their "happily ever after" if they are handsome or beautiful; if they are a prince or a princess. The film deals with breaking from the norm and being unapologetically oneself, familiarizing kids with body positivity and how each individual has "layers," and is much more than they appear.

The 2001 animated film is so often used as a prime example of parody, satire, and reinvention of these old conventions, but what's unfortunately overshadowed by these elements in the world of academia is the movie's abundant use of several distinct accents: there's a Donkey, played by Eddie Murphy, who uses African American Vernacular English, and a vertically-challenged king, John Lithgow's Lord Farquaad, who employs British RP. Even secondary characters have distinct accents, including but not limited to the film's German portrayal of the Three Little Pigs. Shrek's iconic Scottish accent, however, came into fruition in a much more roundabout manner. Interestingly enough, originally Chris Farley was cast as the titular character and recorded about 70% of the lines before his death; he recorded those lines using Standard American English. When Mike Myers was reached out to about taking up the baton, he recorded all of the dialogue in his own native Canadian English accent, but later insisted on making the his character's voice Scottish, which ultimately cost Dreamworks four million dollars (Cronin). The script was not written with this intention in mind, yet today fans find it nearly impossible to imagine Shrek without this iconic accent. This paper will explore why exactly that is, and moreover seek to explain how this choice only planted the film's satirical and nuanced roots deeper into the ground, cementing the way accents can positively affect children in fundamentally developmental stages of their lives.

Before delving into the specifics of Shrek's accent, it's important to first examine how different accents can play an instrumental role in a child's perception of the world. In a study conducted in the University of Chicago's Department of Psychology by Katherine D. Kinzler and Jasmine M. DeJesus, the impact a dialect can have on a child is seen in full effect. Here Kinzler and DeJesus investigated the prepubescent perception of Northern and Southern dialects in the US, gauging the adolescent attitudes in Illinois and Tennessee. The children were presented with a visual stimulus of 2 racially ambiguous faces (out of 16) paired with the auditory stimulus of 2 voice clips (also out of 16): one of these voice clips was of a Southerner, the other was the voice

of a Northern-accented speaker. The 3-second sentences recited in these voice clips were purposefully neutral as to not corrupt the data (for example, “In general, dogs are bigger than cats”). Eight trials per child took place, and upon being shown each face-pair with the voice clips, the subjects were asked, “Which one would you want to be friends with?” and after being shown the same sequence again, were asked, “Who do you think is nicer? Who do you think is smarter? Who do you think is in charge?” (Kinzler & DeJesus, 1149-50). The first experiment executed under these parameters used subjects between the ages of 5 and 6. The children from Illinois were found to prefer Northern-accented speakers as potential friends, but did not answer the second set of questions in a manner that reflected any stereotypes of neither Southern or Northern speakers. Children from Tennessee favored no accent over the other and did not display any stereotyped views. Conversely, children aged 9 to 10 in both Tennessee and Illinois interpreted the Northern-accented individuals as “smarter” and “in charge,” whilst perceiving the Southern-accented speakers as sounding “nicer.” Kinzler and DeJesus conclude that older children are more susceptible to “endorse” stereotypes as they move closer to adulthood, where stereotyping runs rampant. These linguistic attitudes can lead to the development of insecurities and damaging self-perceptions. For example, Southern 9 to 10-year-olds perceived Northern speakers as sounding more intelligent and confident; what do they think about their own accent? Do they hold themselves to a lower academic standard? Whether conscious of this phenomena or not, the results of Kinzler and DeJesus’ experiment likely predict these Southern children to have lower self-esteem when compared to Northern children. The most crucial idea to take away here is that dialectal variation does not go unnoticed by children, rather accents are a key player in the development of a child’s sense of self and perception of others.

Since the target audience of *Shrek* is made up of mostly American children, the findings stated above, though specific to Northern and Southern English, can largely be applied to how the standard *Shrek*-viewer is impacted by the film. The developmental paradigm of dialects is, of course, not limited to the United States, and hence are relevant for children in other sociolinguistic settings. If this film is shown to children around the age of 6, it stands to reason that the protagonist’s use of a non-SAE dialect can halt stereotyping in its tracks, shaping a very accepting, non-judgmental, and self-assured mindset in the developing brain of a child. Even at ages of 10-12, children’s perceptions of different dialects and peoples are very susceptible to change, and can prevent stereotypes from being fully instilled in a given child’s neurological wiring. So, how does Shrek’s Scottish accent encourage dialectal-positivity and acceptance? Let us first look at how the Scottish accent, in general, is perceived by young adults.

In a study taking place in Denmark, Hans J. Ladegaard examined the attitudes of Denmark citizens towards the several different varieties of English in the countru. Five males, all native speakers of their respective accents, were recorded and presented to 96 subjects; 73 of

which were in high school, their average age being 19, and the other 23 were in university studying English Foreign Language (EFL), and were on average 23.4 years old. The five english dialects presented by the speakers were RP, Scottish, Cockney, Australian, and SAE. It's important to note that the 73 subjects in secondary school all had "some knowledge of English-speaking cultures… but this does not imply that they had done any studies of the linguistic, social or cultural differences between various English-speaking cultures" (Ladegaard 255). This cannot be said for the university students surveyed. Each subject upon listening to the speakers' audio recordings was given a questionnaire which asked about the perceived status, competence, personal integrity, and social attractiveness of each of the 5 speakers. A second questionnaire dealing with the "quality of their language and with the identification of speakers" was handed out following the completion of the first set of questions. Subjects were asked to rate the speakers from 1 ("not at all") to 5 ("very much") in each category. The Scottish speaker was a university lecturer in Belfast whose accent is best described as Scottish Standard English (SSE). Phonological features employed by this speaker included the post-vocalic flapped [ɾ] in words like "there" [ðeɾ], the /ɾ/ following a the vowel /e/. Sounds that would generally be diphthongal in RP were instead pronounced as monophthongs in words like "I" [aɪ] or "late" [leɪt], which in SSE became [a:] and [le:t] respectively. Additionally, the SSE speaker's vowel sounds tended to be shorter than the RP speaker's, pronouncing words like "seen" [si:n] in RP as [sɪn] in SSE (Ladegaard 257). Interestingly, the Scottish speaker ranked lowest in the Intelligence, Leadership, and Self-Confidence categories, while ranking highest in the Friendliness category and the Helpfulness category compared to the RP, Cockney, Australian, and American speakers. So why make an ogre Scottish? Why design a brutish, monstrous character with an accent that reflects helpfulness and friendliness? These are not traits typically assigned to an ogre in classic fairy tales, and that's the point.

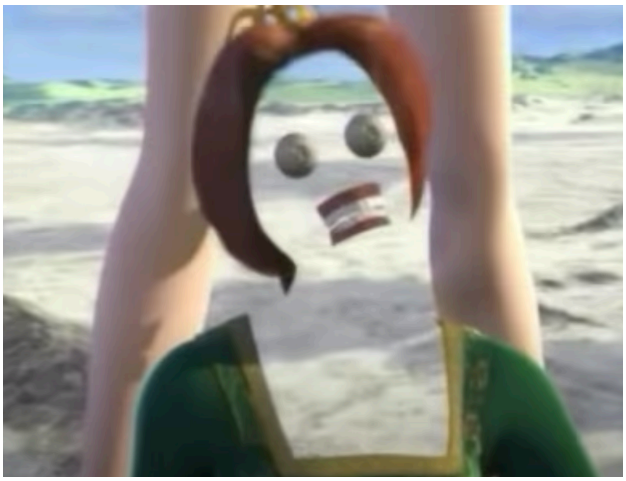
When Mike Myers was asked about his choice to make Shrek Scottish, he provided a wide array of reasons. He explains in an USA Today interview that he felt his thick Canadian accent in which he initially recorded the dialogue "robbed the character of a bit of relatability," remarking that his lines sounded "scary" when he really intended them to come from a place of "vulnerability" (Cronin). In this way, Myers made Farley's character his own, and was praised by directors Jeffery Katzenberg and Vicky Jenson. Jenson once stated this about Myers:

"[He] made Shrek breathe. the unique thing about Mike is that he is an analytical and intelligent comedian. That kind of deep thinking kept Shrek from simply being an oaf who wished people liked him." (Cronin)

SSE is so fitting for this character. As Ladegaard's study showed, the Scottish speaker ranked lowest in self-confidence. Shrek's self-esteem isn't as rock-solid as he tries to make it come across, opening up to Donkey in one scene, saying "people take one look at me and go 'ah! Help!

Run! A big stupid ugly ogre!' They judge me before they even know me, that's why I'm better off alone" (48:05). Myers' use of the Scottish accent is indicative of Shrek's complexity as a protagonist. Shrek is rejected by society for his outside appearance, and is isolated to his swamp because that's where he's *supposed* to be; the stereotypes of an ogre keep him restrained in the role given to him by a world who doesn't understand him. As Shrek explains early in the film, "onions have layers, ogres have layers" and that sometimes people are more than they appear, and this is one of the larger themes explored in the narrative. Myers chose the Scottish accent to reflect those layers; he comes across as brutish and impatient, but really, behind all those layers he fits those Friendliness and Helpfulness categories. There's a certain duality to Myers' character: he's an ogre with feelings, or, a monster who doesn't want to be the monster. SSE allows for these contradictions to shine, making the "scary" character more "vulnerable".

It's hard to find, but scrapped footage of Myer's using his harsh Canadian accent to voice Shrek exists in the deep, dark, cursed depths of the Internet. On the *Shrek* DVD, if you select Special Features, and view the "Technical Goofs," you can hear these original recordings over some rather haunting, incomplete visuals. We actually are able to hear large snippets of un-used dialogue. We can see exactly why Myers was concerned about using his Canadian accent, and its lack of relatability when we compare the lines recited in Standard Canadian English (SCE) to those same lines in Standard Scottish English via IPA transcription.



SCE: *"Hey, I'm no one's messenger boy, ok? I'm a delivery boy."*

[heɪ, aɪm noʊ wʌns mɛsndʒəɹ bɔɪ, ɔkeɪ? aɪm ʌ dɪlɪvəɹi bɔɪ]

SSE: *"Hey, I'm no one's messenger boy, alright? I'm a delivery boy."*

[he, am noʊ wʌns mɛsndʒə bɔɪ, ʌlɪat? am ʌ dɪlɪvəɾi bɔɪ]

Features used by the Scottish speaker in Ladegaard's study are seen in full effect in Mike Myers' interpretation of SSE. In the pronunciation of words like "delivery", Myers' changes the voiced alveolar approximate /ɹ/ to a voiced alveolar tap /ɾ/. We also see instances of "r"-deletion in the revised dialogue, specifically in the word "messenger" where the voiced alveolar approximate is removed at the end of the word. Similarly to what Ladegaard remarked about his Scottish speaker, Myers' also changes the pronunciation of diphthongs to be monophthongs, namely in

words such as “hey” and “I’m”, becoming [he] and [am] rather than [heɪ] and [aɪm] respectively. In Myers’ Canadian pronunciation, I would argue the use of the voiced alveolar approximate is what makes this version of Shrek less relatable. Each /ɹ/ is so harsh compared to instances where it’s absent or replaced by the alveolar tap. The over enunciation of the “r”-sound paired with the gruffness of Myers’ voice is actually quite unsettling, while his Scottish interpretation allows for the audience to empathize with him better; he looks harsh and sounds harsh, yet his voice is now much more nuanced.

Myers interestingly also remarked in an interview with Close Up Film that he selected the Scottish accent to foil the antagonist, Farquaad’s, RP accent, stating, “since Lord Farquaad was played English, I thought of Scottish.” He equated SSE with the “working-class,” which heavily contrasted Farquaad’s “upper-class and elitist” accent. According to Ladegaard’s findings, the young adults ranked RP highest in the Intelligence, Education, Leadership, Self-Confidence, and Social Status categories. These findings all fit Lithgow’s portrayal of the arrogant, well-spoken, prejudiced Lord Farquaad, and are even more telling when observing what RP ranked lowest in: Reliability, Friendliness, Helpfulness, and Humor (contrasted to the Scottish speaker’s success in the categories Friendliness and Helpfulness). The RP speaker, despite using General RP rather than Refined RP, was ranked highest by far in the “Correctness” category, meaning this speaker was perceived to pronounce words most correctly (scoring an average of 4.35 out of 5). Lithgow’s Farquaad employs attributes of RP and this notion of correctness is ever-present in his character, who banishes fairy tale creatures to Shrek’s swamp for being different, weird, and non-conforming. These attributes include the elongation of /ɔ:/ within words like “talk” [tɔ:k]. When Farquaad says, “when no one wants you” in the wedding scene, for example, he pronounces “wants” as [wɔ:nts]. He also pronounces each consonant very clearly; very correctly. Farquaad is an embodiment of every issue the film seeks to address; his character serves as the antithesis of individuality, deciding what is “correct” for everyone. The “correct” way to view Shrek is as an ugly ogre incapable of feeling, no more, no less. Shrek’s Scottish accent, much like the study concluded in terms of the Scottish speaker and the RP speaker, serves to foil Farquaad’s formalized, prim and proper accent.

Going back to the initial study by Kinzler and DeJesus discussed earlier in this paper, the distinctions between Farquaad and Shrek’s accents serve to teach children that even though the Scottish accent may not sound the most intelligent or educated according to students in Denmark, the character that employed the dialect’s features prevailed over the one that sought to nullify them. The use of Scottish accent aligns with the film’s thesis: that any and everyone, no matter how they look, sound, or appear, has layers to them, and is deserving of a happily ever after. If we look at Farquaad as a prescriptivist, dueling out rules enforcing linguistic conformity, the creators of *Shrek* can be seen as absolute descriptivists, encouraging individuality and acceptance of all walks of life. By giving the protagonist a non standard (in the American sense) Scottish accent, children learn that success is not dependent upon how one speaks, but rather what is found in the deeper layers of an onion: one’s character. The use of the Scottish accent subconsciously assists children in emphasizing with Shrek; he’s an ogre who despite being this “monstrosity” is “vulnerable” and “friendly” deep down. A child's association with the titular

character is so powerful in the said child's development as it teaches them to be themself and not place themselves into the molds society has prepared for them. For example, if a Southern 6-year-old were to watch *Shrek,* they might learn that they too can be "smart" and "in charge" despite not speaking like a Northerner. Shrek's journey throughout the film is one based around his self-confidence, which is improved tenfold by the end of the movie. Since the Scottish speaker was ranked to be the least confident, this evolution in Shrek's character teaches its young viewers that they too should be confident in themselves, for they are just as deserving of that happily ever after.

In closing, *Shrek'*s use of dialects can be described as a game-changer in children's movies. Myers' choice to make Shrek Scottish only reinforces the overall messages of the film, quashing stereotypes of any given accent, dialect, culture, or individual. Without this accent, the nuances of our beloved protagonist wouldn't be half as effective; without the accent, the film runs the risk of its viewers struggling to relate to the titular character. A child's development is only enhanced with the viewing of *Shrek*; it's a movie that cultivates individualism and acceptance, and the dialects used are largely responsible for this. A movie's success is much like an onion. It has layers. There's the animation, the cast, the crew, the soundtrack, the producers. But then there's the dialectal choices, and who would've thought that one accent could make such an ogre-whelming difference.

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