LAY PERCEPTIONS OF HISTORICAL ENGLISH AS PORTRAYED IN ROLAND JOFFÉ'S SCREEN ADAPTATION OF *THE SCARLET LETTER*

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Abstract

This paper takes as its object of analysis a cinematic adaptation of an American literary classic, i.e. Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), from the point of view of language. The film under scrutiny is Roland Joffé's free adaptation of Hawthorne's novel (Joffé 1995). The present contribution suggests a different approach to the analysis of the language of period movies than one would typically adopt within the framework of dialectology. This perspective involves a paradigm shift from *representation* (objective) to *perception* (subjective): in particular I propose to focus on the metalinguistic discourse of film reviewers, both professionals and lay writers (writing for newspapers and blogs), with particular reference to their commentaries regarding *linguistic* phenomena in Joffé's *The Scarlet Letter*, namely accent, socio-pragmatic features and verbal morphology.

Keywords: Lay perceptions of the linguistic past, English in colonial America, screen adaptations of historical fiction, lay metalinguistic discourse.

Resumen

Este artículo toma como objeto de análisis una adaptación cinematográfica de un clásico literario estadounidense, *La Letra Escarlata* (1850) de Nathaniel Hawthorne, desde el punto de vista del lenguaje. La película examinada es la adaptación libre de Roland Joffé de la novela de Hawthorne (Joffé 1995). La presente contribución sugiere un enfoque diferente para el análisis del lenguaje de las películas de época al que normalmente se adoptaría en el marco de la dialectología. Esta perspectiva implica un cambio de paradigma de *representación* (objetiva) a *percepción* (subjetiva): en particular, propongo centrarme en el discurso metalingüístico de los críticos de cine, tanto en el de los escritores profesionales como en el de los no profesionales (que colaboran en periódicos y blogs), con especial referencia a sus comentarios sobre los fenómenos lingüísticos en *La Letra Escarlata* de Joffé, a saber: acento, características sociopragmáticas y morfología verbal.

Palabras clave: Percepciones laicas del pasado lingüístico, el inglés en la América colonial, adaptaciones cinematográficas de la ficción histórica, discurso laico metalingüístico.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper I propose to examine a cinematic adaptation of an American literary classic, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), from the point of view of language. The film under scrutiny is Roland Joffé's *The Scarlet Letter* (1995), a "free" adaptation of Hawthorne's novel, starring Demi Moore (as Hester Prynne), Gary Oldman (as Reverend Dimmesdale) and Robert Duvall (as Roger Prynne), and based on a script written by Douglas Day Stewart. The reason why I think this particular period movie deserves attention, in any strictly 'linguistic' sense, is simply that there was what I consider a clear attempt on the part of those involved in the making of the film (in particular dialect coach Tim Monich and screenwriter Douglas Day Stewart) at 'historicizing' the English of the dialogues on several levels (accent, vocabulary, grammar, forms of address). I also believe that they did a very good job, which is not to say that viewers of the film would necessarily agree with my judgement, as should become clear in the present paper. The film already was the object of analysis of a previous article of mine (Pablé 2004), in which I compared the representation of seventeenth-century English in two thematically related and contemporary adaptations of literary classics, namely Joffé's *The Scarlet Letter* (1995) and Nicholas Hytner's *The Crucible* (1996). However, the present contribution suggests a different approach to the analysis of the language of period movies, which also has implications on the materials studied and on the kinds of results that ensue from adopting this new perspective. The latter involves a paradigm shift from *representation* (objective) to *perception* (subjective), however with the latter being presented here in a systematized way according to my analysis.

Historical English as it occurs in film cannot be compared directly to anything 'real' —at least not in the sense that there exist contemporary speakers who would say of themselves that they are native speakers of such-and-such historical variety. When it comes to the more distant past, there are no people who experienced —or remember— the kind of English spoken back then; in this respect, there is a fundamental difference between the early twentieth century and, say, the eighteenth-century linguistic past. The former is still remembered by contemporaries, whose grandparents were born at the turn of the century. The distant linguistic past, in other words, we can know from extant documents only, some of which, according to historical linguists, are 'speech-based' (Kytö 2004), i.e. they reflect oral English. The approach known as 'speech realism' (Kirk 1997) has no obvious place in the academic linguists' discourse on how spoken English is represented within the period film genre, unless one wishes to compare the film dialogues to extant, historically relevant, 'close-to-speech' materials. In the case of Joffé's *Scarlet Letter*, which is set in the Boston of 1666, an obvious resource would be the Salem Witchcraft Papers (Rosenthal *et al.* 2009), dating from the early 1690s, which are said to come closest to the ordinary speech ways of early colonial subjects (Rissanen 2003; Grund, Kytö & Rissanen 2004). The literary scholar will approach a screen adaptation of a literary classic by looking into such questions as the extent to which the language of the original text has been preserved and how the linguistic adaptation has been constrained by the communication format chosen —including how the language of the original has been rendered in this new format. The academic linguist, in turn, will naturally want to explore a different set of questions, such as why certain features of historical English as portrayed in the film occur (while others don't). Either line of inquiry, however, must not neglect an obvious fact, namely that those involved in creating a historical variety of English (e.g. screenwriters, dialect coaches, film directors) do so with a contemporary audience in mind, while also facing another task, namely how to do linguistic justice to the literary text, which involves having to decide where faithfulness to the language of the original is feasible and desirable. Thus, in approaching modern representations of the linguistic past, we might as well cease thinking of the past as a 'thing' with an 'objective' existence separated from the present and start thinking of it as the *product* of the present, as suggested by the linguist Roy Harris (Harris 2004). A reified view of the past has also been critiqued by historical linguists, who dismiss the idea of a disinterested philology that recovers the linguistic 'facts' of the past (Fleischmann 2000). An altogether different case presents itself in dialect movies set in contemporary times (or in the more immediate past), where the availability of both native speakers of a vernacular and professional dialectologists seems to call for an assessment in terms of how 'realistic' or 'authentic' the dialect representations are. This is not to say that academic linguists cannot make critical comments on the historical English in a fictionalized account, for example regarding its 'credibility': however, the expertise upon which such comments are based is, surely, a qualitatively different one. In a lay-oriented linguistics as advocated here, however, the focus will be on understanding laypeople's linguistic awareness of and their linguistic beliefs about the past.

2. LAY-ORIENTED APPROACHES TO FILM LANGUAGE

Given the epistemological constraints briefly outlined in the previous section, I have decided to treat the linguistic features occurring in Joffé's *Scarlet Letter* not simply as objectively given (and those not occurring as objectively not-given); instead I have opted for reporting on the lay perspectives of others, and what they regard as given or not-given, including the many cases where they are not sure about the ontological reality of the linguistic sign. This limits my discussion to those features that non-linguists have commented on because they found them, for one reason or another, to be worthy of comment for the purposes at hand. One obvious source to draw on in such a lay-oriented linguistic approach would involve collecting the statements and opinions of viewers: for example, this could be done experimentally, such as showing informants (selected according to various sociological variables) a number of scenes and asking them beforehand to pay attention to the language of the dialogues in terms of what strikes them as 'different' (e.g. with respect to Standard American English, their own native variety, Northeastern dialects, etc.) and if they recognize any regularities or patterns emerging from viewing comparable scenes from different movies. This kind of 'ethnographic' qualitative approach would be the one preferred by most sociolinguists, folklinguists in particular. Another possibility would be to engage with those directly involved in the language-making process (dialect coaches, screenwriters, film directors, actors) as well as to consult guidelines for screenwriting (in particular instructions how to write period pieces) and manuals teaching accent and dialect imitations. Here I do not propose to follow either approach, however. Instead I would like to focus my attention on a different kind of lay metalinguistic discourse, namely that of film reviewers, both professionals and lay writers (writing both in newspapers and in blogs), with particular reference to their —often brief— commentaries regarding specifically *linguistic* phenomena. By doing so, it is possible for the researcher to infer some of the attitudes, expectations and assumptions characterizing (a particular group of) contemporary speakers of English, both as regards the language of early colonial America (what it was like, what it surely wasn't like, etc.) and the linguistic conventions of nineteenth-century historical fiction (e.g. what elements of the language of the original text are no longer deemed viable in a contemporary screen adaptation). Film reviewers do not form a homogeneous community —for one because there are both professional and non-professional writers— nor do they, simply by virtue of being film critics, 'share' the same language beliefs. On the other hand, reviewing a movie means writing a particular type of text possibly involving a high degree of awareness of who else has written a review about the same film. However, I am anticipating at this point that no significant differences were found regarding the linguistic features highlighted by professional film critics and bloggers. In other words, the linguistic commentaries made by professional critics writing for established newspapers were not somehow qualitatively different from the lay reviewers'. The explanation for this is plausible: while the professional critic may know more about the language of Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*, neither group speaks with authority on the subject of seventeenth-century ordinary English.

In the present contribution I am thus approaching film language as a linguist interested in the lay views of language rather than as one concerned with establishing the linguistic credentials of certain *post hoc* portrayals of historical English. The fact that reviewers single out linguistic issues in their commentaries, however, does not warrant the conclusion that this is how we *experience* film language. We only exceptionally focus on the *language forms* in movie dialogues, i.e. we will do so when we have a particular task in mind (say, writing a review of a movie set in the distant past adapted from a literary classic written in archaic language), or if we are historical linguists by profession. In fact, *the language* (e.g. 'historical English') is only one element shaping the viewers' judgments of, say, the historical credibility of a film. Setting, buildings, costumes, cultural artefacts, the characters' facial expressions and body language in their communication also contribute to the overall impression, even though in our discourse we may choose to treat (i.e. to speak of) each of these elements responsible for a film's local and temporal colour as separated domains. Moreover, which linguistic features, and how many, are singled out in film reviews is also constrained by genre-specific conventions. It is unlikely that a reviewer, in commenting about the language of a film, will produce a comprehensive list of features deemed worthy of mention. In other words, if at all, a few comments on language, usually of a more general nature, will have to do: there are exceptions, of course, such as review articles fully devoted to discussions of accent (as in 'the worst fake accents in movie history'), but they seldom focus on one film only.

3. METALINGUISTIC COMMENTS ON JOFFÉ'S *THE SCARLET LETTER*

Looking through the vast amount of film reviews of *The Scarlet Letter* available online (spanning the time period between 1995 and the present), one notes that the metalinguistic comments on the kind of English found in Joffé's adaptation are of two kinds: they concern *actual linguistic usage*, i.e. features that occur in the speech of a particular character, or several characters in the movie (sometimes mentioned in the form of a direct quotation); or they refer to 'archaic' linguistic usage that does not occur as such in the movie, the aim of which is to make a critical (and humorous) point on the quality of the film in general (or on the contents of a particular scene), by tacitly assuming a common educational (and linguistic) background with the readership, upon which the rhetorical effect rests. The latter phenomenon was already described in an earlier study by David Minugh regarding a different genre, i.e. contemporary newspapers, in which archaic language was found to be used for stylistic effects and serving metalinguistic discursive practices (Minugh 1999).

3.1. Accent

The comments made on 'accent' as part of the lay metadiscourse are mostly negative. Reviewers tend to single out the accent adopted by one particular actor/actress without usually considering that particular accent in relation to the Puritan community and its accent(s) as portrayed in the film. I have found only two reviewers who refer to 'accents' (in the plural). One of them speaks of an 'array of dodgy accents' (example 21) marking the speech of Joffé's characters. The second reviewer views them as 'cod accents' (example 1), thus stressing the lack of genuineness and seriousness (as reenforced by the term 'jiggery-pokery'), and perhaps alluding to the cliché dialects associated with stock characters of popular drama (e.g. the Yankee country bumpkin, the English gentleman, the Irish):

> (1) Despite the cast taking themselves very seriously indeed, *The Scarlet Letter* is a great comic turn, complete with cod-accents and other period jiggery-pokery. (anonymous, *Film4*, August 2009)

Other reviewers specifically target Demi Moore's accent in impersonating Mrs Hester Prynne, a married woman who has just arrived to the shores of the Massachusetts Bay Colony from London; Hester was commissioned by her husband, Roger Prynne, to sail forth and prepare a home for them in the new world. The comments on Moore's accent I have found are almost entirely of a negative sort, labelling it with such epithets as 'rotten' (2), 'affected' (3), 'vague' (6), 'fake' (7). None of these comments actually discuss the historical credibility of the accent itself that Moore tries to reproduce, focussing instead on the quality of her imitation of an English accent:

(2) Moore is simply awful as Hester, strutting around like Queen Elizabeth on a bad parade day, mouthing platitudes in an equally rotten English accent. (John Petrakis, *Chicago Tribune*, October 1995)

(3) Moore's sullen and bovine interpretation of Hester Prynne —not to mention her primly affected accent, which she seems to have learnt from old Hollywood costume dramas— is both misguided and risible (Maitland McDonagh, *TV Guide's Movie Guide*, August 2009)

(4) ...it also features Demi Moore as the "fallen woman," painfully working her way through what sounds to be a British accent. (anonymous, *ONTD!*, February 2011)

(5) At the end of the day, Demi Moore was not only wrong for Hester, but her accent was questionable. (anonymous, *writergurlny.com*, April 2015)

In one instance, the reviewer admits that Demi Moore had to have an accent different than her native one, most likely because Moore's American accent would have been even more misplaced within a movie set in seventeenth-century New England:

(6) On hand are several native Americans and pilgrims straight out of a well-funded Thanksgiving pageant, lending to the "are they SERIOUS?" feeling that plagues the whole thing. This is not helped by Demi Moore trying a vaguely European accent, which jars every time she opens her mouth. I know, it would be worse if she had no accent, so what should they do? What they should do is not make the movie. (anonymous, *Cinema de Merde*, March 2012)

Moore's accent as Hester Prynne even received a mention in the 2010 movie *Easy A*, which is partly inspired by Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*, where the protagonist is reported as saying:

(7) At one point in the film, talking about *The Scarlet Letter*, she deadpans, "Make sure you watch the original, not the Demi Moore movie where she talks in a fake British accent and takes a lot of baths." (anonymous, *Sir Critic's Cinema*, September 2010)

Moore's accent was in the newspaper headlines again after the actress played the part of an Oxford-educated American in the movie *Flawless* (2007), co-starring Michael Caine. The professional writers seem to have condemned it unanimously; one reviewer stated:

(8) (*subtitle*) Demi Moore's strangulated vowels in *Flawless* provide the latest example in a grand tradition of crimes against accents in the cinema. (Simon Masterton, *The Guardian*, November 2008)

Some writers mention Moore's English accent in *Flawless* in conjunction with her earlier performance as Hester Prynne. The following comment, taken from the blogosphere, is one of the rare positive judgements I have found regarding Moore's accent:

(9) Demi Moore tries on a British accent again, which worked out for her so well in "The Scarlet Letter." Now she's a back executive who wants revenge for being passed over for promotions. (anonymous, *Super Blinky*, February 2008)

One reviewer credits all white characters in Joffé's movie with having a British accent except Hester. He criticizes the fact that Hester's lack of such an accent is left unexplained in the film:

(10) Rather like Kevin Costner's Robin [Hood], Demi Moore's Hester is, inexplicably, the only white person in Colonial Massachusetts without a British accent. (Ben Steelman, *Wilmington Morning Star*, October 1995).

Some reviewers also mention actors Gary Oldman and Robert Duvall in relation to their respective accents in the film. As regards Oldman's Rev. Dimmesdale, the most recurrent label used to describe his accent is 'Scottish' (12-14), though 'Irish' also occurs once (11). Some reviewers, in turn, seem unable to identify it (15). Oldman's accent is referred to as 'random' (11), 'wavering' (13), 'inconsistent' (16), and is mostly judged unsuccessful or not convincing enough (12-16). However, it is not always clear whether the 'inconsistency' actually consists in Oldman's performance of the accent itself, or whether it is 'inconsistent' in relation to some homogeneous accent characterizing the other members of the Puritan community in the film:

(11) ...and showed me a young Gary Oldman [...] with a lovely if random Irish accent. (Michelle, *Letterboxd*, undated)
(12) The acting ranges from the clueless to the atrocious. Gary Oldman is apparently trying to do a Scottish accent, Demi Moore is just plain terrible, and Robert Duvall is nuts. (Lukas-5, *IMDb reviews and ratings*, April 1999)
(13) Gary Oldman plays the reverend Arthur Dimmesdale with ink in his face, lust in his loins, and a wavering Scottish accent. (Anthony Lane, *The New Yorker*, October 1995)
(14) Oldman tries like mad to instill this Harlequin romance interpretation of Dimmesdale with some dignity, though the combination of a rotten script and a Scottish accent that pops up whenever it feels like it don't make this an easy task. (A.J. Hakari, *Cineslice*, January 2014)
(15) Gary Oldman was superb although I'm not quite sure what accent he was trying to master (Nixholl, *IMDb reviews and ratings*, November 2007)
(16) ...despite the inconsistent accent and a slight need to over-compensate Gary Oldman is surprisingly credible as Dimmesdale. (TheLittleSongbird, *IMDb reviews and ratings*, June 2011)

Robert Duvall's accent has got mixed responses: one reviewer (17) regards his attempts at sounding English as unsuccessful (identifying the problem as a problem of vowels). Another (18) views his performance less negatively (Duvall gives the impression of enjoying 'putting on' a British accent):

(17) Robert Duvall's Chillingworth has vocal problems of his own as he struggles to wrap his tongue around English vowels. (Anthony Lane, *The New Yorker*, October 1995)

(18) Robert Duvall, as the psychopathic bigot Dr. Roger Prynne, seems to be having a ball affecting a British accent and chewing up the scenery; (Ben Burgraff, *IMDb reviews and ratings*, November 2003)

In connection with Duvall's performance (even though not within the context of a film review), it is interesting to note that the literary scholar Parley A. Boswell admits to not being able to identify Duvall's accent (19), i.e. it could be various things:

(19) The film fails not because the screenplay deviates from Hawthorne's text. The movie has other cinematic problems: the craftsmanship falters. Robert Duvall's accent, for example, is baffling and distracting: English? Irish? What? (Boswell 2014: 158)

One reviewer, finally, mentions Joan Plowright, who plays the heretic Mrs. Harriet Hibbons, saying that her accent is the only 'right' one (20), thus implying that the Puritans of mid-seventeenth-century Boston should all speak with a British accent:

(20) Joan Ploughright was charming as usual, and the only one who got the accent right —being a Brit, of course. (DeeDee-10, *IMBd reviews and ratings*, February 2000)

An important parameter when it comes to the lay perception of accents that I have left unmentioned so far concerns dialectal differences, i.e. the country of origin of the critics themselves. Reviewers may be writing for a British audience, or if British themselves, they may be adopting a 'British view' of how Hollywood portrays seventeenth-century English:

(21) An additional amusement for British viewers is the array of dodgy accents. Gary Oldman's Scottish brogue passes muster (although he's an odd choice for romantic lead). But Duvall speaks with the fake plumminess of an Essex Man who has taken elocution lessons, and Moore seems to have a frog in her throat (unless there is something wrong with the sound recording). (Sheila Johnston, *The Independent*, November 1995)

What is missing almost entirely from the lay metalinguistic discourse regarding accent in Joffé's movie are examples *justifying* the accent labels used ('British,' 'English,' 'European,' 'Scottish,' 'Irish'), i.e. what marks a certain accent as successful or unsuccessful. One such (exceptional) example would be the following transliteration intended to give the reader a flavour of Moore's British accent (i.e. how she pronounces the vowels):

(22) When [Demi Moore] declines a cup of cider with a prim, "Thenk you, noh, I never imbibe," the first giggles of the evening ripple around the auditorium. (Sheila Johnston, *The Independent*, November 1995)

None of the reviewers, moreover, conceive of the possibility that the actors might be attempting, say, an 'Early Modern English' accent, i.e. they do not seem to question their own modern language-labels; for instance, comments such as this one are never found: 'what might naturally sound like a 'Scottish'/'Irish' accent to us (i.e. lay viewers) is actually an attempt at sounding like English folks in the 1600s'. What is more, no reviewer makes suggestions as to what the 'correct' (or 'appropriate') accent would be for a movie set in mid-seventeenth century New England, or what pronunciations must (not) occur; again, comments such as the following one never occur among the lay commentators: 'no-one in the 1600s pronounced their *a*'s open, or dropped their *r*'s, as prescribed by modern Standard British English'. Only one reviewer (23) mentions a 'British accent' that the English-speaking community at that time supposedly shared:

> (23) Especially the English phrasing is brought well by all actors, although Demi Moore failed to imitate the known British "accent" of that time. (Robert Soer, *IMDb reviews and ratings*, November 2004)

3.2. Words and their use

A frequent feature mentioned in the film reviews is the second person singular pronoun 'thou' (and its derivatives 'thee' and 'thy'). This is hardly surprising considering that the *thou* form is a stereotypical feature of period idioms of nineteenth-century historical fiction and drama, equally present in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. The *thou* pronoun is never mentioned as a linguistically credible feature of historical English by the reviewers. It is a highly marked feature, and thus simply treated as a stereotype. The impression is that as a reviewer one can hardly mention 'thee and thou' (a frequent collocation) approvingly, e.g. as the film-makers' attempt to render the English dialogues more nuanced and thus more 'authentic,' or respectively as a sign of their commitment to Hawthorne's period diction. Reading through the reviews mentioning *thee* and *thou*, one has the feeling that the reviewers regard the use of this pronominal form as the film-makers' attempt at compensating for an otherwise too modern language, as the following quote suggests:

> (24) This is not a historical movie; at heart it's a Harlequin romance peopled by 20th century characters, with 20th century mindsets, assumptions and vocabulary (expect for a few "thees" and "thys" thrown in), playing dress-up (Ben Steelman, *Wilmington Morning Star*, October 1995)

Some reviewers comment on the density or frequency with which the movie's characters use the *thou* form of address, which they deem too high. At the same time, the *thou* and *thee* pronouns are also mentioned in the context of particular encounters —what might be termed 'types of situation'— between particular characters (26, 28), or in relation to a specific character (27), or in the context of religious speech (29). Direct citations featuring the *thou* pronoun also occur (28-29); they fulfill a metalinguistic function, while at the same time illustrating the actual uses of *thou* in the film, without, however, specifying why it is that the *thou* form is used in that particular instance (or type of situation):

(25) Though larded with "thees", "thous", and other linguistic antiquities, this "Letter" has been readdressed to meet idiotic modern expectations. (Rita Kempley, *Washington Post*, October 1995)
(26) ...the flirty dialogue full of "thees" and "thous"... (Liam Lacy, *The Globe and Mail*, October 1995)
(27) [Duvall] certainly has it in him to play a part this insidious and conniving, but between his stiff delivery of the "thee"- and "thou"-tinged dialogue and awful pilgrim outfit, Roger's evil doesn't have a chance of leaving you quaking in your buckled shoes. (A.J. Hakari, *Cineslice*, January 2014)
(28) The Reverend Dimmesdale, not surprisingly, is very fond of invoking the Deity when necessary. He even does so with his beloved, exclaiming with most annoying frequency, "God help me, Hester, I do love thee." (Carrie Gorringe, *Nitrate Online*, 1999)
(29) Packed into a wasp-waisted ball gown that looks as if it might have been designed by the Puritan Bob Mackie, Hester heaves her bosom and spouts Biblical references. "Thou canst quote the scripture!" exclaims a town elder played by Robert Prosky, no less astonished than any member of the audience. (David Kehr, *New York Daily News*, October 1995)

Another stereotyped feature that reviewers like to emphasize is the phrase 'good morrow,' also mentioned in conjunction with other cliché period words or phrases (e.g. 'yea' and 'I must take my leave now'):

(30) The film makers kept the "good morrow" and the use of "thee"... (Peter Stack, *Chronicle Staff Critic*, October 1995)
(31) Demi Moore miscast as Puritan Mistress Prynne in Hawthorne travesty. The yea-saying "good morrow" dialogue is deadly enough to defeat actors more talented than her (anonymous, *The Free Library*, March 1999)
(32) Neither [Gary Oldman] nor Demi Moore is credible among a populace with names like Faith and Prudence, and they almost writhe under lines like, "Good-morrow. I must take my leave now." (Joan Ellis, *Joan Ellis Movie Reviews*, undated)

Occasionally the reviewers refer to another type of words occurring in Joffé's film, i.e. words regarded as not befitting Puritan speech (vulgarisms, slang) and hence somewhat anachronistic:

(33) I think I even heard this from a soldier/rapist: "You priceless morsel, I want to poke you." (Joan Ellis, *Joan Ellis Movie Reviews*, undated)
(34) Instead of sewing, [Hester] runs the farm and calls the town elders "bastards" and "hypocrites"... (Liam Lacey, *The Globe and Mail*, October 1999)

3.3. Archaic language used rhetorically

A number of reviewers use (mock-)archaic language as a metalinguistic device for criticizing and ridiculing not primarily the historicized language of the film but its plot, certain scenes, the fact that a good director would even consider making such a film, or that a number of acclaimed actors (usually the ones mentioned are

Oldman, Duvall, Plowright, but *not* Moore) would agree to play in it. The archaisms resorted to for achieving a rhetorical effect are mock-historical orthography —e.g. adding *-e* to the word, whether appropriate or not— (39), stereotypical words, phrases and grammatical forms, i.e. *methinks*, *spake*, and the *a*-prefixing (35-36, 40); concerning morphology, a special mention is called for as regards the *-(e)th* third person singular verbal inflection and the *thou* pronoun with the concomitant *-(e)st* verbal suffix (36-39, 41). What is striking is that the two verb endings are also used with other person-number combinations (36), or even attached to words that are not verbs at all (36), thus further increasing the mocking tone. In some cases (38-39), the reviewers adopt the *thou* pronoun to (pretend to) speak to a character (Dimmesdale) or to the director, i.e. addressing them in the same stereotypical language as they use (or created). Having recourse to archaic forms of English in reviewing *The Scarlet Letter* is, of course, also an indirect comment on the language of the film, i.e. it is implied that such forms, or analogous ones, do really occur as part of the dialogues. If Joffé had had his characters interact in contemporary modern English during the entire film, it is unlikely that reviewers would see a point in using (pseudo-)archaic English for their meta-commentaries:

(35) New England, the 17th century, when everyone spake in 'thees' and 'thous'. (Derek Adam, *Time Out*, June 2006)

(36) The sight of [Rev. Dimmesdale] taketh her breath awayth [...] and his preaching sets her bosom a-heaving [...] Roger Prynne turns up alive but insane. He had been captured by the Algonquins, who sent him home because he insisted on wearing a dead deer on his head. We kiddeth not. (Rita Kempley, *Washington Post*, October 1995)

(37) There is more suspense, more dramatic torque, in one page of Hawthorne's heart-racked ruminations on the Christian conscience than in all Demi Moore's woodland gallops and horizontal barn dancing. Thou hast to be kidding (Anthony Lane, *The New Yorker*, October 1995)

(38) Oh, Roland Joffé, thy free adaptation of the Hawthorne classic didst produce abundant derisive laughter. Didst thou once direct 'The Killing Fields'? (Dan Lybarger, *Nitrate Online*, May 2005)

(39) The Reverend Dimmesdale, not surprisingly, is very fond of invoking the Deity when necessary. He even does so with his beloved, exclaiming with most annoying frequency, "God help me, Hester, I do love thee." Aside from the obvious question of whether or not the Reverend is heading for perdition on the grounds of violating yet another commandment, the invocation is in vain: God cannot help thee, for thou hast placed thyself in a very pretentious and badde filmme. (Carrie Gorringe, *Nitrate Online*, 1999)

(40) Yeah, well, I guess the American viewing public isn't as stupid as Hollywood thinks it is. Or wasn't. Methinks the times they are a-changin'. (The Willow, *The Willow does Gary Oldman Movies*, October 2007)

(41) After about an hour of *The Scarlet Letter*, I asked myself for whom the bell tolls, and hearing "for thee", I left the theater immediately... (anonymous, *New York Magazine*, October 1995)

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS: LINGUISTS *VERSUS* NON-LINGUISTS

It is tempting for historical linguists interested in film dialogue as depicted in Hollywood period movies to assume the roles of experts in assessing whether and to what extent the fictional language agrees with the latest research in their discipline. The language issue in movies like *The Scarlet Letter*, however, is hard to pin down precisely because 'dialectological' questions may not have been in the forefront of the film-makers' efforts in crafting the dialogues. In other words, it often does not make sense, if one adopts the film-makers' perspective, to discuss certain linguistic features as features of 'Early Modern English' rather than features of a literary dialect. Even consulting the screenwriter or dialect coach might not clarify the issue. Suppose I had discussed Joffé's adaptation in the present contribution by proposing an analysis based on the features that (I think) characterize the film's 'historical English,' commenting on their linguistic and sociolinguistic contexts (both in the movie and according to what is known in the professional literature). The first difficulty involved in such an approach is the fact that many metalinguistic labels, especially those borrowed from ordinary language, are themselves semantically indeterminate, i.e. they do not mean the same among the members of the academic linguistic community. Thus it could be asked: when is an accent sufficiently 'British' or 'Scottish' in order to 'really' qualify as such? From whose perspective? Would American linguists and British linguists agree? What phonetic features have to be present in order for a certain way of speaking to qualify as manifestations of such-and-such accent? Are there features that mustn't occur? Moreover, is there an 'objective' way of establishing which features mark a variety as sufficiently 'historical' (both quantitatively and qualitatively speaking)? Again, lexicography heavily relies on ordinary language terms: lexicographical classifications of word usage and word meanings are not based on comprehensive empirical searches —and understandably so: 'when did this word, used with this specific meaning, occur for the first time in the history of English, and by when was it extinct, i.e. no speaker of English was using it any longer?'. How does one establish whether a word, in contemporary English, is to be considered 'archaic,' 'obsolete,' 'old-fashioned' —rather than, say, 'poetic,' 'dialectal,' 'rustic,' 'colloquial,' 'slang,' 'vulgar,' 'rare'? Whose point of view is one adopting when applying these metalinguistic labels? An example will have to suffice here: if Demi Moore's Hester calls the Boston elders 'bastards,' does the latter word contribute towards rendering the English in the film 'historical' (or the opposite)? If the historian of language were to assure us that the word was used in colonial contexts —even by ordinary members of the community when contemptuously addressing members of the clergy or those holding a high political office, then arguably the word as used in the movie mirrors early colonial English 'as it was,' even though from a contemporary lay perspective the word does not, strictly speaking, qualify as 'historical'. In other words, what is deemed (too) 'modern' (by lay people) could be viewed as precisely lending historical credibility to the linguistic portrayal of the past in the film— from a purely philological point of view. *It all is a matter of perspective.* Perhaps screenwriter Douglas Day Stewart put the words 'hypocrite' and 'bastard' in the mouth of Hester to achieve a certain *stylistic* effect. Perhaps this kind of straightforward language suited his portrayal of Hester Prynne as an aristocratic woman with an inclination towards non-conformism. 'Speech realism' may thus not have been the primary issue here. Just as it will not suffice for the historian to judge the costumes, the weapons and the settlement as depicted in the film solely on the grounds of their degree of 'authenticity,' it will not do for the linguist to pass judgment on the period language on the grounds of its degree of 'authenticity,' either. Film language is 'constructed' and serves many purposes. Linguists are not the 'better' judges when it comes to the historicisation of film language. In fact, the academic linguist could be facing the charge of merely listing an idiosyncratic selection of features *giving the impression* that the dialogues in a film are realistic depictions of Early Modern English (e.g. by focusing entirely on those features labelled 'archaic,' 'obsolete,' etc. in the recognized historical grammars and historical dictionaries). Thus the reviewers of Joffé's *Scarlet Letter* could reject the thesis advanced in my earlier publication (Pablé 2004), i.e. that the film-makers succeeded in crafting a form of English reasonably close to Early Modern English for this movie, by proposing a counterthesis (which some reviewers seem to endorse), namely that Joffé's characters simply speak modern English interspersed with archaisms. And they would be right in doing so given that their perceptions are based on 'evidence' just as much as mine is.

Lay people's commentaries regarding the language of period movies, e.g. as they manifest themselves in the film reviews analysed here, do not seem to relate to aesthetic or literary concerns. Like the historical linguist, they assume that there is a linguistic 'reality' (both past and present) against which phenomena such as accent, vocabulary and pronouns of address are to be judged. The reviewers lay no claim to being language experts, but at the same time their statements are made with linguistic confidence since they do not expect to be challenged on that particular topic by their peers. Thus they can afford to mention 'dialogues full of thees and thous' without having to know anything about the second person singular pronouns *you* and *thou* in the Early Modern English period, i.e. their respective variable uses. The limits of lay linguistic awareness cannot be clearly determined —*anything* can catch our attention: inconsistencies in accent performance, a certain way of pronouncing certain words, particular words that sound 'wrong' in certain contexts, repetitions of a particular expression or form, etc. However, most reviewers only mention a very limited number of linguistic phenomena, which is not to say that they didn't notice many others. Some of their discourses are metalinguistically rich, which manifests itself, as we have seen, in the reviewers' creative uses of archaic English.

Whether or not the makers of *The Scarlet Letter* 'succeeded' in representing the language of early colonial America is not a question that can be settled objectively. The answer very much depends on one's personal linguistic experience, one's educational background, and the context in which such a question is raised, i.e. how one contextualizes the question.

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