

Be Not Like You:
Be a man-man, one-one, orang-orang, utang-utang:

Language is a very important aspect in life because it acts as a tool of communication, be it spoken or not. A spoken language has its own possibilities to be widely spoken or to vanish, wiped by the ruling language. It's entirely needless to say that English has survived and successfully climbed its way becoming world's most widely spoken language. Not only do the people of the world learn how to read and speak the language, but they also learn the linguistic aspects of the language such as grammar points and proper dialects.

How English did it? Well, obviously through centuries of history, in which were methods, and among them were colonialism, literature renaissance, political conflicts, and sometimes everything at once. Most of the time, these things affect teenagers, young adults, and a grown person in the nick of time; for example, Singaporean writers in the 1950's quickly adapt English as a medium for their literary works. They even created a new set of language named *Engmalchin*¹. Students all over the world are now dictated by a curriculum which mandates them to learn English as an additional language. However, perhaps there is something we are not aware now concerning the spreading of English: that the imperializing of English is also being targeted to children, especially those who watch Disney cartoons; which means every child in Earth.

¹ A term coined in the 50s by Singaporean & Malaysian writers for a new language that incorporated English, Malayan, and Chinese language. It lived only shortly because it was unsatisfactory.

The Disney Empire has been around for many years. Walt Disney began introducing the black and white lovable mouse character named *Mickey* through a short strip titled *Steamboat Willie*², and since then have feasted our eyes with classic tales (*Cinderella, Snow White, Sleeping Beauty*), fables (*Lady and the Tramp, Bambi, Dumbo*) futuristic-themed movies like *Atlantis* and *Treasure Planet*, and the hi-tech CGI³ movies such as *Monsters Inc.* and *Chicken Little*. But perhaps the most memorable period of Disney animation is the *Disney Renaissance era* when the company focused on returning to traditional Disney standard storytelling modes and motifs, a confidence on ever-expanding filmmaking technology, and a strong influence of *Broadway*. I assume people who have the same age as mine are familiar with the 1990's when the Disney animation team was on its peak. To name a few, *the Little Mermaid, the Jungle Book, Aladdin*, and *the Lion King* were titles which led Disney to many awards and profit from merchandise sales.

The linguistics of English concerns of many features from phonology, to semantics and pragmatics. All are branches studying the intrinsic values of the English language. One of the intrinsic values that we study in linguistics is dialects and accents. We already know that among the British people, the highest honored accent is the *RP*, or *Received Pronunciation*⁴. However, in its progress within the cultural development of the world's population, the English language has produced another set of pronunciation which we accept, and seen as the prospective global dialect: the American English

² The first cartoon Walt Disney had ever made. It was screened for the first time in New York, in black and white, in 1928.

³ Computer-Generated Images. Before the Disney cartoons were hand-drawn.

⁴ A pronunciation of British English, originally based on the speech of the upper class of southeastern England and spoken at public schools, Oxford and Cambridge Universities. Also referred to as *BBC English* as it was traditionally used by the BBC.

accent. Through this paper, I will try to show how Disney's animations have tried to set and emphasize an understanding in children's mind about the unblemishness of the standard pronunciations of English compared to other English dialects.

Let's start with the normal ages when children started to watch Disney movies. Many parents that I know usually give their kids the 'old school' Disney cartoons **before** moving on to more realistic or more brutal cartoons and children's shows. Therefore, it's safe to say that most children knew Disney's animation at a very young age; 2 or 3 years old, perhaps. In addition, most parents feel safest when showing their children something that belongs to Disney's vault, rather than showing them movies from *Warner Brothers (Animaniacs, Looney Toons)* or *Hanna & Barberra (Tom & Jerry, Flintstones)* because these companies were already known for the more vulgar, and more brutal cartoons. It is also inevitable that Disney's cartoon also have strong message that, we have to admit, are important such as women independence, and the ever-going fight between good and evil. Those views and the fact that Disney movies make more money and profit than else companies, ensures us that Disney in fact takes control of the world's young inhabitant.

Richard Day had said in his article, *Children's Attitude towards Language*, that "children as young as 3 are able to make language attitudinal judgments which reflect adult beliefs prevalent in the speech community". This means young children has an ability to make a judgment based on the accent/dialect they are hearing. Just like adults, they may create prejudice towards certain dialect/accents, creating segmented images in correlation with the pictures they see on the screen. Surely this isn't something we want to teach our children at a young age: having prejudice towards other people. Nevertheless, intentionally or not, Disney cartoons seem to have hidden messages for

children which may result them to do exactly that. I won't be mentioning all of Disney's creation; instead, I will only be talking about those which have the most apparent linguistic evidences regarding my hypotheses.

First of all, let's begin with the most obvious evidences which are actual words that are spoken by characters in Disney movies. In the *Lady and the Tramp*, there are some cats that are portrayed cunning, sinister and insidious. As if their slanted eyes and obvious characteristics do not give away the information that they are in fact Asian, it is stated in the song they sing, "We are Siamese, if you please". What caused this has never been surfaced to the public, but if we look at the historical context, the film was released in 1955, a year after the Korean War – U.S was also in the midst of a Cold War fear against China. In a way, this can be categorized as somewhat a propaganda saying that Asian people are cunning, sinister, and dangerous. In addition, Lady, never talk to the Siamese cats although through the rest of the movie she talks with everyone using SE. Some say it's only because she was afraid to the cats. But could it be because the makers of the film wanted to give out the impression that Lady – an American dog – didn't understand what the cats were saying because they were Asians?

Everybody knows Disney made a version from *the Jungle Book*, a novel written by Rudyard Kipling, which tells the story of a boy named Mowgli who is raised by the animals in the jungle; two of them are Bagheera (a panther parent), and Baloo (a slightly ditzzy bear). In the movie, Mowgli was kidnapped by a group of monkeys and meets King Louie – an orangutan who is apparently the monkeys' king in the jungle. Perhaps this is an over-the-top analysis, but the fact that his name is Louie (which probably came from

Louis Armstrong) and he is singing swing jazz and also scats⁵ reflects that this orangutan, if the story is in real world with real people, might be a black person.

One of the characteristics of Disney's cartoons is that they are all musicals. Here is an excerpt of what King Louie is singing:

Ding-ding-lo-la, diddly-o-zing-boing, sca-bee-do-hee-bo-doo, hee-bo-deb, diddly-do-moi, I wanna be a man-man one-one, orang, orang, utang utang” and ends with him saying “Now, don’t try to kid me, man-cub. I made a deal with you. What I desire is man’s red fire to make my dream come true. Now, give me the secret man-cub. Come on! Clue me what to do. Give me the power of man’s red flower so I can be like you.”

As you can see, after he scats, he talks with a Black-English Vernacular dialect. Underlined phrases like *wanna be*, *kid me* and *clue me* are examples of the BEV which are used widely (even until now because the black culture is currently the pop culture). The fact that he wants to be like ‘you’ – Mowgli, the representation of SE in the movie – can be considered as a subtle racial attack, saying that Black people (who use BEV) are lower than white people (who masters SE). Could it be that this is the counter attack from the Disney Empire to the black people who once marched in rallies during the 1960s when racial issues were high?

One of the most recognized Disney canons during the Renaissance era was *the Lion King*, which won 2 Oscars in 1994. It also became a hit as Broadway adaptation with the same title, and the Disney’s screenplay was improved to fit in IMAX theater screens. Nevertheless this would not escape the idea that the Lion King may have used the English language as a weapon by also incorporating *Non-native English pronunciation*⁶ with the villainous characters.

⁵ Jazz singing in which improvised, meaningless syllables are sung to a melody.

⁶ Non-native pronunciations of English result from the common linguistic phenomenon in which non-native users of any language tend to carry the intonation, phonological processes, and pronunciation rules from their mother tongue into their English speech.

As we know, the plot of the Lion King can be linked with *Shakespeare's Hamlet*; in which is a story of a prince (Hamlet, Simba) who's deceived by his uncle (Claudius, Scar) who plots to take over the king's (King Hamlet, Mufasa). In the movie, Scar has 3 helpers in the form of hyenas⁷; Shenzi, Banzai, and Ed. The hyenas aren't so much significant in the movie for they are only Scar's aids; however they appear quite often in the movie, and their number of appearances are enough for me to notice right away that the hyenas speak in BEV and a dialect only American Latinos have since Mufasa, Simba, Scar, and the other member of the kingdom talk with posh, bright, and proper English accents.

The hyenas in the movie are dependent to Scar. Under the reign of Mufasa the hyenas couldn't kill preys as much as they want so Scar promised them a place in the animal kingdom when he became king IF they do exactly what Scar tells them to do. This means the hyenas are the underdogs who cannot do anything that is outside their lord's will. In addition, although they are fierce hunters according to encyclopedias, the hyenas in the movie always look starving because they didn't have anything... and grinning as if they were crazy. So far we will get the understanding that the low, dependent, starving, poor, and disoriented creatures are talking in BEV and Latino English. Have the dots connected, and we can see this is a representation of negative images of the black and Latino people in America who usually live in poverty, slightly disoriented, and can only follow other people to get what they need. But although they don't seem to have the power at first, in the end, they helped more than enough to destroy a kingdom.

⁷ Carnivorous mammals of the family Hyaenidae of Africa and Asia, which feed as scavengers and have powerful jaws, relatively short hind limbs, and coarse hair.

The last example is from the movie that was released in 1992 and was based on a legend that was passed on through generations: *Aladdin*. As you might expect, the story (and movie) sets in Baghdad, an Arab city. The story goes that Aladdin meets Jaffar who tricked him to go to the forbidden cave which holds a magic lamp which is inhabited by a genie. Aladdin befriended genie, Aladdin meets Jasmine and fell in love, Jaffar tried to kill Aladdin for the lamp, Genie helps Aladdin, Aladdin saves the day, and the world is safe from the hands of evil Jaffar. Simple? Of course! It's Disney's, after all. But is the film as innocent as it seems?

You see, this is what's confusing about Disney movies. Foreign dialects are often used in Disney movies to sort out characters and their traits. But is it really necessary to use the *Standard English Pronunciation* (SE: RP or American English) only for the good guys in the movie? Throughout the movie, Aladdin and Jasmine both have American English accents although they are Arabs and live among Arabs; they are both 'Anglicized', if you will. On the other hand, the 'bad' or villainous Arabs speak with thick Arabic accents. If children as small as 3 years old can develop a perception of Arab accents, without proper parental advice, without ever knowing about Osama or Saddam, his/her perception must be terrible also. After all, the Arabs didn't like Aladdin.

Looking through the examples, I am now finding myself in the middle of reasonable doubts about whether or not Disney movies deserve its position as the number one international company who is said to be the first life lesson guru for kids. Because of its vastness, the company has the power to produce movies that appeal to the citizens of the world. Unfortunately, these movies uphold mainstream values by giving the most

appealing characters (the 'good' characters) the role as the representation of the dominant culture (American or English).

There is a sort of naturalization or generalization in Disney movies which is unfortunately based on Anglo-based views of the world. We've seen the dancing orangutan, King Louie, scat and sing jazz in 1967. The hyenas in the Lion King can also be interpreted according to a conservative point of view about how black and Latin youth communities in the U.S would have bad effects on the society surrounding them. What's more, we also knew that a year before Aladdin was released, the U.S and Allied Forces were handling the Gulf War in Kuwait, which may be the reason behind the portrayal of antagonistic characters through their Arabic English accents.

Linguistic Imperialism is a struggle for power (Tollefson, 1995). Since Disney's 'huggable stories' can double-function as teaching machines, it is very important to realize that even the slightest hints of remark in the movie may be an attempt to sustain the power of certain ethnicity, culture, and even language. It could be a weapon to interfere with or handle issues from another country (Siamese cats in Lady and the Tramp), or a tool to prepare young generation with an understanding that cultural differences that are not essentially of middle-class, or white ethnicity are inferior, unintelligent, and could be a threat in the future (Black and Latino speaking hyenas destroying Mufasa's kingdom).

English can act as a boomerang; even more, it can be the Trojan horse that destroyed Paris' kingdom. The spread of this language, not only can it downsize the native language of other countries, but it also can dominate the culture and perhaps later eliminate both the language and culture. All in all, with the absence of critical judgment

towards even the happiest animated movie on earth, there's always the probability of subtle mission of imperialism seeping under. It cannot be questioned that learning English is important. It is, for English is the ultimate access to the world, just like the rabbit hole that took *Alice* to her *Wonderland*⁸. However, it is really up to us, the ready market of Disney, and any other animation-making company, to decide on whose eyes we are going to see with. Are they ours, the Anglos, or perhaps the eyes of God, where everybody – every culture – is one creation no matter what language they speak?

⁸ Alice began her adventures when she accidentally fell into a rabbit's hole.

Concept Introduced

1. International English or English as a Global Language

The concept of the English language as a global means of communication in numerous dialects, and the movement towards an international standard for the language. It is sometimes referred to as *Global English*, *World English* or *Standard English*.

2. Cultural Hegemony

The concept that a diverse culture can be ruled or dominated by one group or class, that everyday practices and shared beliefs provide the foundation for complex systems of domination.

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