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The Evolution of Multilingualism in Movies: From Portraying Exclusion from Society through Negative Stereotyping in *GoldenEye* (1995) to Code/Switching in *The Hate U Give* (2018)



INTRODUCTION

“Every Black American is bilingual. All of us. We speak street vernacular, and we speak job interview.” (Chappelle)

The Black comedian Dave Chappelle said these powerful words during an interview in 2008, aiming to turn his audience’s attention to the fact that people of color are forced to code-switch in specific settings in order to avoid linguistic discrimination. Negative stereotyping on the basis of language, a practice called linguicism, has a long history. Believing in the superiority of one language or dialect over another has impacted people in the past and continues to do so today. Solely due to a different first language or a dialect that is not spoken by the majority, a myriad of speakers are excluded from certain basic needs on a daily basis. While this happens almost everywhere, the focus of this essay will be on the English-speaking world. As negative stereotyping is an important societal issue, code-switching and multilingualism are not missing in movies and TV shows. However, film presentation of this phenomenon has changed significantly over the decades. This will be further analyzed with the help of two examples: *Goldeneye* and the 2018 coming-of-age drama *The Hate U Give*.

GoldenEye is a classic James Bond movie from 1995. While the movie has reached an indisputable cult status among fans of the action genre, the depiction of multilingual speakers can certainly be criticized from a linguistic point of view. It supports several obsolete elements, with the most prominent one being the negative characterizations





of multilingual speakers. These linguistic tendencies are further explained by Lukas Bleichenbacher in his essay “Linguicism in Hollywood Movies? Representations of, and audience reactions to multilingualism in mainstream movie dialogues”. Language can be used as a tool to discriminate against certain characters and in this specific case, those characters do not speak English as their first language.

This negative depiction of multilingual speakers differs immensely from the 2018 coming-of-age drama *The Hate U Give*. This movie is narrated by the African American protagonist Starr, who explains how the racial discourse in modern America affects her daily life. Constantly torn between her poor Black neighborhood and her predominantly white school surroundings, she also struggles with speaking different language varieties, always adjusting her way of speaking depending on the people by whom she is surrounded. This phenomenon is called code-switching and will be examined more closely in this essay. However, code-switching is not portrayed as something inherently negative. The movie rather highlights the necessity of code-switching for some people to be taken seriously by their surroundings. While the ability to speak several dialects or languages is something that should be praised instead of condemned, this stands in contrast to portrayals of multilingualism in older action movies. However, *The Hate U Give* (referred to as *THUG* hereafter) portrays how social exclusion can result from failing to meet dominant expectations around when and where code-switching is deemed appropriate, revealing the societal pressures placed on linguistic behavior. Hence, for





some, it is not just a way to enrich your knowledge but a necessary means to manage life.

The depiction of societal exclusion through language in movies started with negative stereotypes shaping multilingual speakers. Their multilingualism was, at least partly, the cause of their exclusion. The movie industry evolved so far as to show code-switching as a method to minimize this exclusion. This can be regarded as a mirror of society's attitude towards linguicism. In order to properly represent this evolution, the concepts of linguicism and code-switching need to be explained briefly. After this general overview, it is possible to look at the influence of these practices on movies and TV shows. This enables a close analysis of *GoldenEye* and *THUG*. The comparison shows the shift in movies from multilingualism as the main tool for exclusion to multilingualism as a method to decrease said exclusion from society.

MULTILINGUALISM, CODE-SWITCHING AND LINGUICISM

Prior to any analysis, some relevant terms used in this field of study should be examined briefly. Firstly, it is crucial to mention that definitions can change over time. One example of such change is society's idea of multilingualism. For a long time, only speakers of two or more languages at a native level were considered multilingual. More recently, however, researchers have broadened the term. People speaking one language fluently and another on a different level are included as well. Today diversity regarding proficiency and literacy is also encompassed by the term (Grosjean 21).





Globalization has led to an increasing number of multilingual speakers in recent decades. As a consequence, a sociolinguistic phenomenon called code-switching has manifested itself in the English language. Based on their environment, multilingual speakers are able to adapt the way they speak. This change can refer to the alteration of languages, dialects or simply language varieties (Cheng and Butler 294). There is certainly more than one form of code-switching. Speakers may change back and forth between two languages within a sentence. Often, they have a dominant language, the matrix language, into which elements from the embedded language are inserted. In other cases, speakers use different languages or dialects in particular situations. There will be various examples of the latter use when *THUG* is analyzed more closely. Changing environments can mean using different dialects at work or home, in the classroom or during a rendezvous, when talking to a client or a sibling. Also, society's perception of code-switching has changed immensely. Formerly seen as a sign of language incompetence, it is now considered an enriching opportunity for multilingual speakers to make use of several language resources. Code-switching "taps into the reservoirs of semantic/pragmatic fields, and social and psychological associations of words and phrases in not just one language, but in two (or more)" (Myers-Scotton, 2005).

Despite multilingualism becoming more significant on a global scale, not everybody fully values second language (L2) speakers who have not reached full proficiency or first language (L1) speakers of a dialect that is not spoken by the country's





majority. Especially in mainly monolingual countries, there is often an attitude of superiority towards one language. This form of language-based discrimination is referred to as linguicism. Just as with multilingualism in general, there are institutional and individual effects of linguicism. For instance, stigmatization of certain dialects in the educational system exists. This can be explained by the English language's long history of linguicism, in particular in a post-colonial context. It barely comes as a surprise that linguicism has not disappeared from the United States. Whether code-switching is condemned in classrooms or immigrants are judged for their grammar mistakes, linguicism is still prevalent today. Since the issue has also re-emerged in America's racial discourse, it is a natural consequence that there is filmic representation of multilingualism, code-switching and linguicism.

LINGUICISM IN MOVIES

Multilingualism has affected multiculturalism heavily. Naturally, culture mirrors recent developments in society, including recent debates on linguicism. Code-switching has certainly found its way into different forms of media, especially social media. English has become so predominant that even national newspapers of non-English speaking countries adopt English words. The language is also widely used in documentaries, TV shows and popular music. Although this is not news in multilingual countries like Singapore or India, there has also been progress in countries that were once considered





monolingual, such as the United States. It seems that Hollywood has started mirroring Bollywood in terms of diverse multilingual representation.

Yet it has not always been this way. TV shows and movies are an effective way to make a distinction within society, more specifically between insiders and outsiders. Through language, identity is created. In addition to that, language heavily determines the character's connection to the audience. Especially code-switching is a significant tool when it comes to marking identity and relationships. Usually, there is a matrix language of a film's dialogue and situational changes are highlighted by code-switching. The function of code-switching in films as a differentiation between the norm and the "Other" is further highlighted in Lukas Bleichenbacher's 2012 essay.

According to the Swiss linguist, who has conducted extensive research on mono- and multilingualism in movies, movie dialogues are the result of a language planning process by producers, directors and screenwriters and therefore count as a characterization of monolingual or multilingual individuals for the audience. Additionally, movie dialogues always reflect prevailing ideologies existing in a society, including linguistic ones. Furthermore, movies and TV shows are among the most discussed and reinterpreted cultural texts thanks to their easy access and enormous audience (Bleichenbacher 156). This is exactly the reason for their considerable impact on society.





A character's linguistic abilities certainly shape basic aspects of their characterization, or in other words "whether somebody is a 'good' or 'bad guy'" (Bleichenbacher 157). Movies dominated by linguistic attitudes can be expected to portray non-English speakers as more negative than English L1 speakers. In a closer analysis of 28 popular Hollywood movies, among them multiple action movies, Bleichenbacher discovers that there is an interrelation between a character with a different L1 than English and being portrayed in a negative manner. Moreover, his results show that there is an interrelation between knowing a further language and positive characterization. However, this is only true for characters with English as a first language. The same does not apply to multilingual speakers with a different L1 than English (Bleichenbacher 159).

Apart from a correlation between characterization and language, there also seems to be a connection between language choices and the general mood of a movie. Firstly, it is important to highlight that most movie scenes in Hollywood movies are in English even if English could not possibly be spoken. But in the rare case that another language is spoken, more often than not, the mood is dark and the activity portrayed is a criminal one instead of a character's everyday life. Also, the setting plays a role, with non-English scenes often taking place outside. On top of that, the dialogue is often about political contexts and seldom about love or friendship (Bleichenbacher 160).

Nevertheless, not all movies make use of these obsolete tools. Particularly recent ones try, more or less successfully, to include multilingualism. An increasing number of





protagonists are shown as multilingual speakers, accents are not used to mark villains and non-English conversations can certainly be about other topics than crime. Aside from simply representing multilinguals, some movies even raise awareness of the hardships that the multilingual community has to endure.

While Bleichenbacher provides a foundational perspective on code-switching in movies, additional scholarship can expand the theoretical base of this essay. For example, Michael L. Ross argues in *Words in Collision: Multilingualism in English-Language Fiction* that multilingual characters in Anglophone fiction often embody narrative conflict, where language becomes a marker of cultural tension and potential resistance (128). This insight helps frame *The Hate U Give's* portrayal of code-switching not merely as a survival strategy but as part of a broader struggle over linguistic legitimacy. In her book *The Power of Language*, Viorica Marian deepens this concept by showing that multilingualism is not merely a communicative tool but an intrinsic part of identity construction. Her research demonstrates that characters like Starr are not switching between separate selves, but rather embodying a fluid, integrated linguistic identity. Together, these views challenge a purely functional reading of code-switching. By integrating these perspectives, this essay moves beyond an essentialist view of (im-)proper code-switching and toward a new understanding of how linguistic practices reflect and resist systems of power.





GOLDENEYE'S USAGE OF LINGUIICISM

The James Bond movie *GoldenEye* from 1995 follows the spy James Bond on his mission to stop an ex-colleague attempting theft with the help of a nuclear space weapon called *Goldeneye*. The movie can certainly be considered a classic among all action movies. Moreover, it was one of the highest-grossing films in 1995 and thus counts as mainstream cinema.

Since the genre of spy movies is typically male-dominated, regarding its audience, producers and characters, it comes as no surprise that most of the female characters are hypersexualized and the camera adopts a typically male view. In addition to that, discrimination based on language can also be found in *GoldenEye*. It is not uncommon for James Bond movies to feature villains with a strong Russian or German accent. In fact, there are very few villains with an American or let alone a British accent. On the one hand, since *GoldenEye* has to be put into its historical context, perhaps criticism should be limited. On the other hand, however, the main villains of the most recent three James Bond movies, *Skyfall*, *Spectre* and *No Time to Die*, are all multilingual speakers with heavy accents. Lyutsifer Safin is Russian-born, Ernst Blofeld is from Austria and Raoul Silva is either Brazilian or Portuguese. Despite these villains spending most of their lives in foreign countries, they never lose their L1 accent. The same is true for General Arkady Grigorovich Ourumov and the Georgian pilot Xenia Onatopp in *GoldenEye*.





The movie starts with James Bond on a mission in the USSR. The Soviet Union had very few English speakers since travelling was restricted and acquiring English as a foreign language was not encouraged. Unsurprisingly, the first words uttered by Bond are in English, even though the Soviet soldier reading a newspaper article in Russian obviously cannot understand him (*GoldenEye* 03:08-11). Additionally, the order “Fire” (*GoldenEye* 05:53) by the Soviet officer to his troops is given in English. The scene is not logical this way, as Russian should be spoken. Already being the epitome of a womanizer and an excellent agent, it is not condemnable that James Bond is not fluent in multiple languages. However, short utterances such as orders could easily be given in the original language and be translated into English via subtitles.

In the next scene, the Soviet officer talks to James in fluent English (*GoldenEye* 07:10-37). Again, he is a rather negatively portrayed character, and his Russian accent is strong. One minute later, Bond is running away from an army of soldiers shooting at him. Again, orders like “Move” (*GoldenEye* 08:38) are given in English, even though it would not have been necessary to translate them from Russian into English at all since they are not relevant to the plot. Also, subtitles would have been an easy option.

As Bleichenbacher already stated, languages other than English are only shown in specific contexts. Russian or German are often used when villains talk about criminal activity in James Bond films. This is also the case in *GoldenEye*, for instance inside illegal military bases (*GoldenEye* 1:57:01) or the casino (*GoldenEye* 18:00).





In another scene, Bond arrives at a hotel in Monaco. When greeted by the hotel's valet driver in French, he replies with: "Bon soir, Pierre. Ça va bien?" (*GoldenEye* 17:25-30). This statement is spoken with a British accent and does not seem natural. In addition, Bond nods and leaves Pierre without waiting for an answer. While moving away and thereby ending the conversation, Bond puts his fingers together as if to say: "Good". Because he does not answer Pierre's follow-up question about how he is, it is obvious that Bond does not know more than one or two basic phrases of French. Of course, this is not negative as Bond simply tries to be nice by saying a few words in Pierre's L1. However, it does underline Bleichenbacher's argument about English L1 speakers knowing words in another language being praised more than non-English speakers with similar or better abilities.

The movie *GoldenEye* uses a myriad of clichés about multilingual speakers. This use of linguicism is reflected in certain elements like portraying villains with heavy non-English accents, the general lack of multilinguals despite the international setting of the film, as well as non-English conversations revolving around nothing but criminal activity. The key element of James Bond films is not verbal communication but rather action. However, the representation of multilingualism should not be underestimated. Even if only indirectly, it has an impact on its audience. Linguistic characterization can shape a people's or even a nation's idea of other places and communities.





James Bond can be viewed as a British hero, idolized by boys and men alike. *The Cultural Life of James Bond: Specters of 007* provides a valuable framework for understanding how Bond films project a specific form of British linguistic and cultural dominance. As the essays in the collection argue, Bond “remains identifiably British—and indeed English” (106). Yet, he travels to multiple countries per movie and can be seen as an “imperialist adventurer”, combining exoticism with the upholding of British supremacy (106). His Britishness functions as a marker of cultural superiority, which adds to Bleichenbacher’s arguments about linguistic dominance within the franchise. Framing the analysis through such cultural critiques situates the film within broader discussions of post-colonial identity and linguistic politics in global cinema.

Throughout the years, however, national pride in Bond has toned down considerably. While national pride was most present in the early Bond movies, recently the secret agent even drove German or Italian cars. Furthermore, sexism, once a fundamental part of the franchise, has also decreased immensely. Solely in the field of linguicism, there is little to no improvement throughout the James Bond films. *GoldenEye* represents obsolete views on multilingualism, especially on non-L1 speakers of English.

THE HATE U GIVE AS AN EXAMPLE OF NEW MULTILINGUAL REPRESENTATION

The Hate U Give is an American coming-of-age drama from 2018. It is a representative movie of recent discourses around race and language in the United





States. The movie tells the story of 16-year-old Starr who witnesses the shooting of her unarmed Black friend by a police officer. Apart from being traumatized by the incident, she struggles with the social contrasts of her poor Black neighborhood Garden Heights and her predominantly white preparatory school. Throughout the movie, she is confronted with police brutality, performative protests and her personal identity struggle. However, this is not the only way that discrimination is portrayed in the movie. Code-switching also plays a crucial role.

Starr code-switches frequently, in an effort to fit in. She feels like she belongs to neither Williamson Prep school nor Garden Heights. She is leading a double life where she avoids the slang and manners of one environment in the other. Both places make her feel like she has to hide her true self, highlighting Marian's argument on the crucial role of language in identity construction. Her way of adjusting is code-switching. At the beginning of the movie, Starr says: "Slang makes them look cool; it makes me look hood" (*THUG* 07:23-27). She does not want to give white people any reason to call her "ghetto" in order to prove them wrong about their prejudices. Code-switching is not her only way to achieve this, she also avoids certain manners that could manifest stereotypes about African American women. Starr does not wish to be perceived as aggressive, angry or dangerous. This attitude controls her looks, manner and language.

Code-switching can happen unintentionally and on purpose. Especially young people tend to code-switch to fit in with a certain social group. Starr's friend Hailey is





portrayed as a white girl using African American slang. One example is a conversation between the two girls about Starr's boyfriend: "If someone tries to do some shit to my girl, I have to get'em" (*THUG* 08:01-07). Starr would always avoid this kind of slang in school, but Hailey does not have to. In another scene, a white classmate tells Starr that her "kicks are lit" (*THUG* 07:28). Often young people of all colors imitate Black rappers' ways of talking since those have fans among all ethnic groups. While Hailey does not have to fear any kind of repercussions for her use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), Starr would have to. Her statement about slang stresses Dave Chappelle's message about necessary bilingualism. It is not always a choice to speak two languages or dialects, it can also be a necessity.

This can be connected to Bleichenbacher's results concerning linguisticism in movies. More often than not, appreciation of multilingualism only works one way. Hailey is almost praised for her use of AAVE, or at least considered cool by other classmates. Starr, in contrast, is expected to be able to change the way she talks to her parents and the way she talks at school. Similarly, Starr's Black friends mock her for hanging out with white teenagers (*THUG* 15:45-53). Adjustment is key for code-switchers. Errors can have serious consequences, a fact that becomes even clearer throughout the rest of the movie.

In another scene, Starr's family is interviewed by the National News (*THUG* 1:08:05-1:09:10). In order to be taken seriously by the interviewer and audience, they





dress up nicely and the children are told to be more polite than usual. Just like Starr, all of them seem to live a different life for a while. This includes a change in appearance, body language and, of course, dialect. Not just teenagers in high school but all Black people are forced to conform to society's standards, predominantly white standards.

Even the very first scene of the movie shows the differences between the socialization of Black and white children. There is a necessity for Black parents to talk with their children about the safest reactions to police encounters. This does not only involve behavior, such as slow movements and having one's hands visible at all times, but also the way they talk to police officers (*THUG* 00:36-50). Starr is only 9 years old when her father explains this to her, clearly illustrating an enormous strain on the child. It becomes increasingly comprehensible why some people code-switch. They feel that changing their dialect is needed for safety during something as simple as being pulled over by a police officer.

Another crucial scene in the movie concerning code-switching is Hailey being called out on her use of slang without understanding the impacts of discrimination on African Americans. Angry at Hailey's hypocritical protesting, Starr shouts: "It's all 'our' and 'us' and 'Black Lives Matter, girl' until you clench your purse when you're in an elevator with a Black person" (*THUG* 1:39:42-52). Starr is tired of white people speaking their own form of AAVE without realizing what effects the dialect has on Black people. This scene demonstrates the concept of language as a marker of cultural, in particular





racial, tension, introduced by Ross. He describes language itself as a “zone of contention” (Ross 128). AAVE functions as one form of resistance and unity for Black Americans, while white people like Hailey appropriate it by not understanding the struggle over its legitimacy. This is why Starr’s behavior changes and she acts aggressively towards Hailey. This breaking of the character she plays at school signifies her frustration about having to code-switch in the first place.

There are hundreds of examples of movies portraying code-switching, particularly recent ones. A critically acclaimed horror movie is *Get Out* directed by Jordan Peele. A Black man visiting his white girlfriend’s family realizes that something is off when the other Black guests at a dinner party behave strangely. They do not reciprocate certain gestures like fist bumps and none of them use AAVE. This is how he slowly figures out that the people in front of him are actually elderly white people who have transplanted their brains into Black peoples' bodies, granting them immortality. Frequently, code-switching is portrayed as a way of unionizing and creating identity, as described by Ross and Marian.

Through showing Starr’s African American perspective on code-switching, it becomes clear that it is not depicted as something inherently negative in *THUG* but rather an essential tool to navigate through life. Different manners and ways of speaking create her two opposite personas, which still make up one integrated language identity. Starr is able to change back and forth between them based on her two daily





environments. Failing to switch according to social expectations is not always welcomed by the respective groups and can have severe consequences, as can be seen in the movie.

CONCLUSION

The representation of multilingual speakers in movies has changed a lot. While the majority of films used to depict characters with non-English L1s as bad people, nowadays a wide variety of multilingualism is shown. Code-switching is becoming more frequent and some movies like *THUG* even explain the reasons for adapting one's language or dialect in given contexts. Both *THUG* and *GoldenEye* have been watched by millions of people and therefore have a comparably broad audience. Supported by their major impact on society, their portrayal of multilingual speakers is thus worth discussing. Language is constantly changing. Hence, ideas of multilingualism and film representation of it transform over time. The two movies make this transformation visible.

GoldenEye is a useful example of linguisticism in movies. It features villains that are fluent in English and yet all have a strong foreign accent. All major scenes are in English, even if logic would require another language. Those stereotypes can have a tremendous influence on the movie's audience.

The Hate U Give shows a radical contrast. It is not easy to compare these two films since they were produced in different decades and belong to different genres. Still,





important linguistic developments can be seen. Multilingual speakers are not portrayed as bad people anymore, unlike in the movies examined by Bleichenbacher. Instead, *THUG* shows the struggles of code-switchers who are forced to adapt their language. This also stresses Chappelle’s message of African Americans struggling with separating dialects every single day. Starr and her family do not get praised for their ability to speak AAVE and General American. This is expected of them and the misuse of one variety in the wrong context can have severe consequences.

THUG, unlike the majority of older movies featuring multilingualism, thus functions as an inclusive space for a myriad of code-switchers and multilinguals. It fights the outdated views of movies like *GoldenEye*. The comparison highlights the shift in film representation from that of multilingualism as a tool for exclusion to multilingualism as a method to decrease exclusion from society. Ultimately, this essay’s analysis gains depth when situated within broader theoretical discussions of multilingualism. By drawing on scholars like Marian and Ross, it becomes evident that the evolution in film portrayals—from linguisticism and monolingual supremacy to an embrace of code-switching and linguistic hybridity—reflects ongoing societal tensions around language, identity, and power. *THUG*’s worldwide success leaves hope for more depictions of language diversity in movies including and even primarily dealing with multilingualism.





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