

(Non)standard voices in films and TV

The case of butlers and governesses

Butlers and governesses/housemaids usually speaking the ‘upper-crust’ variety of British English to match that of his/her masters have been common stock characters in films and TV shows (Ranzato 2018). The larger definition of stock characters, which includes but is not limited to stereotypes, encompasses a set of both visual and linguistic formulaic features that, according to Quantz (2015: 37), are “typically associated with certain positions or identities”. However, even if the employees of upper-class families are usually expected by audiences to speak with a flawless received pronunciation, not all renditions of these character types have followed this trend. Some authors and actors have opted for portrayals in nonstandard brushstrokes, often to make the story sound more “realistic” and context-based (this is true also for many adaptations of the classics of English literature, see for example the 2011 *Jane Eyre* by Cary Fukunaga).

Butlers (even more than governesses) are associated in popular imagination with characters who remain silent for most part of the respective stories, and that is probably why actor Michael Caine, himself the impersonator of a popular butler, once stated in an interview (in Thorpe 2017) that in the 1960s “if you had a cockney accent you were going to play the butler”. Nonetheless, the history of cinema is full of quite ‘vocal’ (and sometimes even Cockney) butlers and governesses and the present contribution intends to illustrate some examples of meaningful linguistic representations of these types, both in comedy and in drama, taken from a significant number of films and TV series from the 1930s (*Ruggles of Red Gap*, Leo McCarey, 1935) to nowadays (the *Gotham* series, Bruno Heller, 2014-2019).

Through memorable and lesser-known depictions that span the history of cinema and television, this analysis of original and translated dialogue exchanges will show how the aura of fixedness and immutability that this character projects is indeed apparent: meaningful differences in its linguistic representation testify to the narrative importance of this fictional type, often the catalyst of social tensions, comedic virtuositities, or dramatic plot twists.

References

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