Representations of Native American Identity in Films of the 21st Century: Is their portrayal authentic?

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1 Introduction

This sociolinguistic study investigates the "imagined" language used within fictional representations of the American Indian in order to explore the degree to which Hollywood Injun English (cf. Meek, 2006) may be differentiated from Standard American English (SAE) with respect to a set of structured linguistic features. Utilizing a corpus of 21st century Hollywood films portraying American Indians, I draw comparisons between different forms of pejorative speech, such as Junk Spanish (Hill, 1993; 1993a; 1995; 1998) and Hollywood African American English (AAE) (Bucholtz, 2011), as well as explore issues of authenticity within these films.

In the following, I provide a review of prior characterizations of Hollywood Injun English as first proposed in Meek (2006). Additionally I discuss 'authenticity' as a social construct and offer a working definition for the purposes of the present research paradigm. This study's critical discourse analysis methodology will be outlined before detailing data analysis and offering a comparison of Hollywood Injun English with other forms of pejorative speech and results previously reported in Meek (2006). Lastly, I conclude with reflection on the role of this study within the fields of linguistics and anthropology, and future directions for this type of research.

2 Background: Hollywood Injun English

Barbra Meek argues that Hollywood Injun English (HIE) is neither "heterogeneous nor acquired, neither a dialect nor a language," as there is no such thing as a homogeneous American Indian English (AIE) language spoken by all American Indians, but rather that HIE characterizes a set of distinct patterns found within spoken discourse in "white public

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space" (Meek, 2006, p.112; Hill, 1998). While HIE may share characteristics with dialects of AIE, these features are not found within all dialects. Rather, patterns are associated with specific dialects—for which grammatical rules have been shown to govern their use (Meek, 2006, p.112). In HIE, however, dialectal features shared with select AIE varieties do not conform to the same grammatical constraints and usage patterns found in said native varieties. Instead, in HIE these features' usage and representation is considerably more variable.

HIE's feature set encompasses multiple domains of grammar including prosody and morphosyntax as well as use of specific lexical items, as described by Meek (2006). At the level of prosody, for instance, frequent pauses placed outside the phrasal and syntactically defined constituent boundaries are exhibited, in addition to leveled intonation contours. Frequent pausing, especially when utilized outside of constituent boundaries, lengthens and slows an utterance—promoting a ponderous speech style that also suggests dysfluency or ungrammaticality—and the use of this and other HIE patterns at levels of morphosyntax and lexicon is limited only to indigenous characters in films within Meek's analysis.

In this analysis, however, the focus is on documenting instances of morphosyntactic patterns and lexical choices found within HIE. Thus, the following features will be discussed in relation to the films analyzed in the current study[2]. Morphosyntactic patterns of HIE identified in Meek's analysis include:

(1) a lack of morphological marking for tense
(2) deletion
(3) substitution (e.g. replacing subject pronouns with object pronouns or a full noun)
(4) lack of contraction

According to Meek, a lack of morphological marking for tense portrays an aspect of the "Noble Savage Motif," which promotes Native Americans to exist in a sense of 'timelessness,' living in the past rather than within the modern present as well as not having the capacity for understanding the Western concept of time, due to different linguistic representational structures of time (2006, p.101). The following example is taken from *Peter Pan* (Disney, Geronimi, Jackson, & Luske, 1953) as analyzed in Meek (2006, p. 100).

(1)   Lack of Morphological Tense Marking in HIE
   a.   Indian Woman: Squaw **get-um** (gets) firewood.
   b.   Wendy: Squaw **no get-um** (is not getting) firewood.

Each of the bolded verbs demonstrates a lack of morphological marking of tense, which promotes this sense of dysfluent or "foreigner" speech as well as the sense of 'timelessness' described above. What is even more interesting to note about this example is that Wendy, an Anglo-European character in the film, is able to speak HIE as well as Received Pronunciation (RP), switching between the two easily, while the Native American characters are only able to use HIE. These Native American characters lack the capability to navigate between these two speech styles, promoting the idea of incompetence or lack in capability to produce RP constructions.

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[2] The author refers the reader to Meek (2006) for further discussion of Hollywood Injun English.

Deletion, along with a lack of morphological tense, acts to promote a sense of childlike, timeless speech through omission of (1) auxiliary or modal verbs that are marked for tense in SAE (e.g. 'is' and 'was'; 'will' and 'could'), (2) subject pronouns, and (3) determiners. In some cases, rather than using deletion to achieve this childlike, or "foreigner" speech, characters will utilize substitution in which subject pronouns are replaced with object pronouns or nouns. Finally, lack of contraction is implemented through not merging non-modal auxiliaries and copulas (e.g. have and be verbs) with the preceding subject pronoun, or through not merging the negation marker (e.g. 'not') with the preceding verb. This final pattern utilizes the syntactic flexibility of English to—rather than produce foreigner, or childlike speech—further create the "Noble Savage Motif," denoted by an "image of archaic eloquence" (Meek, 2006, p.105). Further examples for each of these patterns as well as the specialized vocabulary described will be provided within the analysis of data in Section 4.

In conjunction with the use of these linguistic patterns—prosodic and morphosyntactic, "certain specialized vocabulary words and lexical imagery," some which have been taken from American Indian languages, come together to create the "Hollywood Injun" (Meek, 2006, p.106). The use of this specialized lexicon invokes imagery that associates the speaker's identity as a Native American with the lexical feature in a homogenized, stereotypical fashion (e.g. 'wampum,' 'squaw,' 'injun,' 'savage'), that is, these words, while associated with Native American identities in areas of public discourse (e.g. media), are not reflective of the ways Native Americans refer to themselves, and such lexical items are actually seen as offensive in native communities. Along with these lexical features, primeval (archaic or precivilized) imagery is also promoted through the use of figurative language, such as nature metaphors (e.g. 'many moons ago'), or references that promote the 'timeless' disposition of the American Indian (e.g. 'before the white man') (Meek, 2006, p.108). The use of this linguistic imagery, specialized vocabulary, morphosyntactic and prosodic structures combine to create the "Noble Savage Motif" found in many Hollywood films throughout the last century.

3 Defining the 'Authentic'

In this study, I have followed the methods of Meek (2006), utilizing critical discourse analysis to document instances of morphosyntactic features, specialized vocabulary, and figurative language that promote the "Noble Savage Motif" through use of HIE in a set of films produced between 1998-2013. The key distinction between my own analyses and Meek's, beyond time frame of each film's release, is found within the type of films I have chosen to focus upon. The films I explore, while a small sample, compose a diverse spectrum of producers, writers, directors and actors, as well as unique choices of linguistic representation. Specifically, three of these films are produced by Anglo-Europeans, while two films have been put produced, directed, written, and acted entirely by Indigenous community members. Thus, differences in HIE features across these two communities are important to explore, in that they can provide insight into the contexts in which the "Hollywood Indian" appears, and suggest that the affiliations of producers may be a key to understanding the ways in which Native American identity is represented on screen.

In order to examine these films, a definition for authenticity must be explored and extended to the context of each film. The traditional construct of the authentic speaker presents many problems to sociolinguistic studies of identity and authenticity, as it assumes the speaker to be a member of a homogeneous social grouping with clear boundaries that isolate the group from social and linguistic contact, and it ignores the

internal language attitudes of the community and the outside language attitudes brought into the analysis by a linguist. Thus, Mary Bucholtz proposes a new way of looking at the concept of 'authenticity,' in which, "Real language—that is, authentic language—is language produced in authentic contexts by authentic speakers," and social identities are continually negotiated within social contexts and linguistic practices, within "authentication processes" (2003, p.398). This suggests the concept of authenticity should rather be looked at as a set of effects of the social processes, which instantiate "one's own or another's identity as genuine or credible" (2003, p.408).

In the present study, I adopt this definition of authentic language, utilizing the approach of Bucholtz (2003), and apply it to each film to evaluate the authentication processes found within the gathered data through critical discourse analysis in each presented portrayal of Native American identities. In utilizing this approach to identity, one avoids the shortcomings of the previous definitions of an authentic speaker as existing within linguistic isolation and within stable social identities, and adopts a broader approach to the study of authenticity that applies, even to fictional representations, due to its dynamic, relational nature.

4 The Data: A Spectrum of Hollywood Films

The discourse of characters identified as Native Americans has been analyzed within contemporary Hollywood films in order to evaluate contemporary use of HIE. The films analyzed are listed in Table 1 below[3].

Table 1 The films

Produced By:	Film	Year Released	Character
Anglo-Europeans	*The Lone Ranger*	2013	Tonto, the Comanche Chief, Butch Cavendish, Red Harrington
Anglo-Europeans	*The New World*	2006	Pocahontas and the Powhatan people
Native Americans	*Smoke Signals*	1998	All Characters

Remember that HIE has been claimed to be characterized by a set of grammatical 'abnormalities' (Meek, 2006, p. 95) that include forms of linguistic imagery, specialized vocabulary, morphosyntactic and prosodic structures that combine to create the "Noble Savage Motif" found in many Hollywood films of the last century. In this paper, I will present data from the films listed in Table 1. While HIE patterns are found within data from *The Lone Ranger* (Bruckheimer & Verbinski, 2013), demonstrating the stereotype of the "Hollywood Indian" still exists in contemporary film, there appears to be evidence in support of a shift away from stereotypical representation of Native American identities in

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[3] Five films in total were actually analyzed within this study, which includes, in addition to those listed in Table 1, *Apocalypto* (Gibson, 2006), produced by Mel Gibson and portrayed by Native American actors/actresses in Yucatec Mayan, and *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* (Apak Angilirq, Cohn, Kunuk, Wong, Bochner, & Kunuk, 2002), produced, directed, written, and portrayed by Native American community members.

films produced, written, and directed by Native American community members, such as *Smoke Signals* (Eyre, Alexie, Bressler, Estes, Rosenfelt, Skinner, & Alexie, 1998), which portrays what can be defined as authenticity of Native American identity.

4.1 The Lone Ranger

Many Native American community members have argued against the authenticity of Johnny Depp's performance in this major Hollywood production adapted from the TV classic, especially against the way his character, Tonto, speaks in "That sort of monosyllabic stuttering, uttering Hollywood Injun-speak," as stated by previous head of the UCLA Native American Studies program, Hanay Geiogamah (Del Barco, 2013). Thus, it is not surprising that numerous instances of HIE features have been documented within the film.

From its beginning, *The Lone Ranger* (Bruckheimer et al., 2013) is set up to portray the "Noble Savage motif," in which Native Americans are seen as belonging to the past. This is visually represented as a very old Tonto awakes from his mannequin state in a museum exhibit, titled "The Noble Savage," to share his story with a little boy. HIE features have been documented from the discourse of Depp's character, Tonto, as well as the Comanche Chief in the film that incorporates many of the morphosyntactic features of HIE, such as lack of morphologically marked tense, deletion (of determiners, subject pronouns, and auxiliary verbs), and lack of contractions. I provide examples of morphosyntactic and lexical features below.

In section 2, it was discussed that lack of morphological tense marking produces a speech style that promotes dysfluent, "foreigner" speech and a sense of 'timelessness' that presents Native Americans as living within the past rather than the modern present (Meek, 2006). The following examples demonstrate this phenomenon, which is prevalent in Native American speech in *The Lone Ranger* (Bruckheimer et al., 2013).

(2)   Lack of Morphological Tense Marking in HIE
           a.   Tonto: Dead man **strike** (strikes) fear.
           b.   Tonto: River **run** (runs) red.
           c.   Tonto: Where (are) you **go** (going)?[4]

Deletion of determiners, subject pronouns, and auxiliary or modal verbs is also utilized in Tonto's discourse throughout the film, which—along with lack of morphological tense marking—works to further create this dysfluent, "foreigner" speech throughout the film, as shown in examples 3, 4, and 5 below.

(3)   Determiner Deletion in HIE
           a.   Tonto: (the) Time has finally come.
           b.   Tonto: (the) Horse says you are (a) spirit walker
           c.   Tonto: Do not touch (the) rock.

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[4] There is an alternative interpretation in which, rather than demonstrating a lack of morphological marking for tense, this sentence could be a case for deletion of an auxiliary verb as in, "Where (did) you go?"

(4) Pronoun Deletion in HIE
  a. Tonto: (we) Make trade.
  b. Tonto: (I) Want to touch.
  c. Tonto: (you) Might want to keep that to yourself, Kimosabe.

(5) Auxiliary Deletion in HIE
  a. Tonto: Dan (is) very dead.
  b. Tonto: Horse (is) definitely stupid.
  c. Tonto: Wendigo (are) getting away.

While substitution, the least consistent morphosyntactic feature of HIE, is not found in the discourse of these Native American characters, lack of contraction does appear in the film.

(6) Lack of Contraction in HIE
  a. Tonto: I **do not** fear what comes next.
  b. Tonto: Spirit walker **cannot** be killed.
  c. Comanche Chief: **You are** John Reid, **brother of Dan**.

When non-contracted forms are found within discourse of these Native American characters, auxiliary verbs are present—following the patterns described by Meek (2006). However, this is the only case in which auxiliary verbs are present throughout the film.

Finally, the use of specialized vocabulary, while less prevalently used within this film than within those analyzed by Meek (2006), is still utilized to label Tonto by Anglo-European characters in the film, Butch Cavendish and Red Harrington.

(7) Specialized Vocabulary in HIE
  a. Butch Cavendish: I know you, **Injun**?
  b. Red Harrington: **Injun's** right

The word 'Injun' is thus used to characterize a Native American in this film by Anglo-European characters, but Native American characters dissociate from this term, never utilizing it as an identification label of their own identity.

Finally, the use of primeval imagery is prevalent throughout this film, as it uses figurative language to promote the 'timeless' nature of the Native American characters. For example, the Comanche Chief uses phrases such as, "many moons ago" when speaking of the past throughout the film. Further, within the plot of the film, a 'spirit horse' appears and chooses John Reid to be his 'spirit walker.' This horse is personified, having the ability to communicate with Tonto—not John Reid or any other Anglo-European character in the film. Tonto converses with the horse, seemingly understanding what the horse is attempting to communicate at different points in the film and scolding the horse for choosing John Reid as his 'spirit walker.' This data leads to the conclusion that *The Lone Ranger* (Bruckheimer et al., 2013) portrays the image of the "Hollywood Indian" in a similar fashion to previous films through the use of HIE features.

4.2 The New World

The New World (Green & Malick, 2005) is a Hollywood film, directed by Terrence Malick, which set out to portray the legend of Pocahontas promoted within the Disney animated version (released 1995) utilizing indigenous actors and a reconstruction of the

Virginia Algonquian language. While no instances of HIE were documented within this film, interesting patterns regarding language use by the indigenous characters can be discussed.

Pocahontas is the central character in this film, bridging cultural gaps between the Powhatan people and the English settlers, and thus her transitional use of Virginia Algonquian and English throughout the film provides insights into language attitudes promoted within *The New World* (Green et al., 2005). Throughout the beginning scenes of the film, Virginia Algonquian is the language spoken by Pocahontas and the Powhatan people. From the time she and John Smith meet, she tries to teach him to use words in her language. What is interesting, however, is how Smith does not seem to retain this information, primarily communicating in English instead of learning Powhatan. As the film progresses, not only does Pocahontas begin to learn English from Smith and others around her, she also begins to narrate in English throughout the film. In these scenes though, her face is never shown speaking English—it is as if English is disconnected from her character during this transition in her life. Finally, Pocahontas is exiled from her community, and so she goes to live with the English. As she lives among them, not only is she shown speaking English, she also slowly transitions in appearance and mannerisms to become an "Englishwoman." Examples of this can be seen in her clothing and development of pale skin as well as in the ways she spends her time. When portrayed as a member of the indigenous community, Pocahontas was always outdoors, roaming the land freely. Becoming a member of the English colony, she learns the customs associated with being an Englishwoman and takes a new name, Rebekah. The time she spends outdoors is now typically used to work in the fields rather than roam free. Once this transition occurs, Pocahontas no longer speaks her indigenous language in later scenes, except on rare occasion. The Englishmen and women do not ever acquire Virginia Algonquian, nor do they make attempts to, and once again, Native American identity is portrayed as an archaic, primeval people—existing before modernity— a people of the past.

Beyond the evident language attitudes and undertones of cultural stereotypes promoted in this film, *The New World* (Green et al., 2005) is cast in a reconstruction of Virginia Algonquian, created by a linguist, Blair Rudes, intermingling with English. The language spoken by Pocahontas and the Powhatan people has long since become a language of the past. Thus, while the use of this reconstructed Virginia Algonquian represents Malick's desire for 'authenticity' of the film's content, the film is misleading to the audience, as reconstructions are created from written records and never the exact replica of historical, spoken language. Further, the content still promotes openly contested legends of the life of Pocahontas, a strategic choice of the producer, director, and writers of this film, as Producer Sarah Green advocated the legends resonate powerfully with the audience they wish to reach, promoting a great 'love affair' (Masters, 2005).

While this film promotes cultural stereotypes that echo the "Noble Savage Motif," it appears there is a shift in representation of the Native American characters in *The New World* (Green et al., 2005), portrayed through the characters' use of 'authentic' reconstructed indigenous language rather than HIE. Even more fundamentally, the indigenous characters cast in this film are of Native American descent, including Q'orianka Kilcher playing Pocahontas. However, authentication is a complex process that interacts with identity in a multitude of ways, and this film is also based upon a legend, not an authentic, historical context, and discrepancy exists over the authentication process that occurs in this film, as it lacks "authentic context" (Bucholtz, 2003).

4.3 Smoke Signals

Smoke Signals (Eyre et al., 1998) was produced, written, and directed by Sherman Alexie and Chris Eyre, both members of Native American communities, telling the story of the adventure of two Coeur d'Alene teenagers, Victor and Thomas. In the film, Victor and Thomas have differing perspectives of what it means to be an "Indian," and, as they go on an adventure to retrieve the ashes of Victor's father, they are forced to confront these conflicting feelings about their identities. This film brings out a new perspective of the stereotypical identities of Native American characters, enacted to directly confront the lack of authentic representation of Native Americans in Hollywood films through the characters' humorous, reflexive analyses of the stereotypical identities of the Native Americans in areas of public discourse, such as the media. Choices made by Alexie and Eyre challenge the stereotypical "Hollywood Indian," through casting Native American actors in each role of the film as well as behind the scenes and using a screenplay written by a community member, Sherman Alexie, to create an "authentic" representation of Coeur d'Alene reservation life. It is not surprising then that these characters do not utilize HIE throughout the film. Instead, these actors are rooted in "this time and place and not a fictionalized past" as the "Noble Savage Motif" would promote (West and West, 1998).

In an interview about *Smoke Signals* (Eyre et al., 1998), Alexie proposed the key to changing the stereotypical representation of Native Americans in the media will occur "When Native American people start creating other prominent books, art, and culture" (Buhain, 1998). However, in the film Thomas says, "The only thing more pathetic than Indians on TV is Indians watching Indians on TV," yet he is an Indian portraying his Indian character in a successful Hollywood film. This dichotomous line in the film works to show the audience the ways in which stereotypes and marginalization of Native American identity in the public discourse of "white public space" take root in the authentication processes that work to negotiate and establish the actual identities of Native Americans in contemporary society (Hill, 1998).

5 Results and Discussion

The data presented in Section 4, as well as the lack of HIE patterns found in two of these films, suggests that, while the stereotype of the "Hollywood Indian" still exists within Hollywood films, there may be a contemporary shift occurring in the way Native Americans are represented in films. Not only does it appear that Native American producers are creating an authentic portrayal of their own people, so also is the Anglo-European Hollywood producer, Terrence Malick, as well as the writer of the film's script, making a conscious effort to present what they, and a hired linguist, Blair Rudes, deemed to be the 'most authentic' representation of the historic Powhatan language and culture in *The New World* (Green et al., 2005). While this does not mean that Native American communities have unanimously accepted this film as authentic or that it entirely promotes an authentic, historic indigenous reality, it is clear that the producers consciously made choices to enhance the authentication of their characters rather than promote the stereotypical "Hollywood Indian" yet again on screen.

Most salient of the features of HIE present in these films were linguistic imageries and conceptions of time, promoting a sense of the Native American living within the past, and frequently within a primeval state, 'before the white man came' (Meek, 2006). In some cases though, this stereotypical image was created through cultural imagery, such as Pocahontas' transition from an indigenous woman into an Englishwoman, rather than

through use of HIE features. Even in *Smoke Signals* (Eyre et al., 1998), it is clear that Alexie paid special attention to the way time was conceptualized and presented within the film, though he, as an indigenous community member, specifically does this as a confrontation to this stereotype. His goal was to present his characters thoroughly grounded in contemporary context.

The analysis of these films, while a small sample, can be utilized in comparison to Meek's previous conclusions as well as compared to other types of "racialized" speech found within "white public space," such as Junk Spanish (Hill, 1993, 1993a, 1995, 1998) and White Hollywood AAE (Bucholtz, 2011). Jane Hill characterizes white public space as a "morally significant set of contexts that are the most important sites of the practices of a racializing hegemony, in which Whites are invisibly normal, and in which racializing populations are visibly marginal" (1998, p.682). Language becomes racialized due to the influence of ideologies surrounding language, race, gender, etc., and these ideologies "both reflect and enact racial inequalities" (Barrett, 2006, p.201). Junk Spanish and White Hollywood AAE share similar patterns of linguistic variation with HIE, as characterized by their distortion of phonology, morphology, syntax, and use of meanings (Hill, 1993a, p.247; Bucholtz, 2011, p.259). Further, when compared to their authentic source languages (e.g. Spanish, AAE, and AIE), linguistic patterns of HIE, Junk Spanish, and White Hollywood AAE do not follow the grammatical constraints and usage patterns of the source language, appearing in more varied forms. These speech styles are not presented as 'authentic' in the context of SAE, nor in the context of their source language.

Through incorporation of HIE, as well as cultural representations which draw from language ideologies that maintain and reproduce the stereotypical "Hollywood Indian," the producers, directors, writers, and actors of Hollywood films such as *The Lone Ranger* (Bruckheimer et al., 2013) maintain and reproduce not only "imagined realities," but also ideologies about the language used and identities associated with individuals representing members of Native American communities within "white public space" (Hill, 1998). In utilizing HIE in Hollywood films, characters reinforce the ideological association that Native Americans speak HIE, and also that forms of AIE are homogeneous rather than differentiated throughout individual communities.

6 Conclusion

It has been more than forty years since Marlon Brando, an Academy Award-winning Hollywood actor, openly stated that, "Indians have been tragically misrepresented in films, and in our history books, in our attitudes, in our reporting, so we must set about to reeducate ourselves" (*Hollywood Greats*, 1973). Further, Pauline Strong offers a valuable comparison that, "for many Native Americans and other colonized peoples, "savage" is a potent and degrading epithet, comparable in its effects to the word 'nigger' " (1996, p.418). If HIE lexical features can be characterized as offensive by Native American communities, it does not follow that words such as "savage" should be utilized in Hollywood productions in reference to Native American characters. However, these language ideologies have been maintained and reproduced due to the nature of "white public space," (Hill, 1998) a space in which the White majority determines what is acceptable within the context of public discourse. Thus, the conclusion proposed more than forty years ago has yet to fully reproduce a different reality within the realm of public discourse, as films such as *The Lone Ranger* (Bruckheimer et al., 2013) persist. Perhaps there is progression toward this new ideological reality that promotes 'authentic' portrayals of Native Americans though as films like *The New World* (Green et al., 2005)

and *Smoke Signals* (Eyre et al., 1998) continue to be produced and publicized within Hollywood and more broadly within the context of public discourse.

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