

William Pickett
California State University, Fullerton

A Believable Accent: The Phonology of the Pink Panther

If the empirical data employed by a linguist is defined as that which is “verifiable or provable by means of observation or experiment (AHD4, p. 586)”, then should data thought to be somehow contrived by the subject under observation be eliminated from consideration? Researchers use methods such as “double blind” experiments in an attempt to eliminate the influence of the observer on the observed, but isn’t the data gathered from the subject of a linguistic observation who is aware he is being observed also “real linguistic data”? In the end a human being under linguistic observation is still a human being using language, and since pragmatics cannot be eliminated from speech, there is no reason to assume that one pragmatic consideration creates a more unacceptable bias than another. In other words, the data is what it is. It is in the interpretation of the data that any errors will occur.

If the above is true, then language employed on the stage, in motion pictures, television or radio surely belongs in the general corpus of “human language”, and is therefore a body of data suitable for legitimate linguistic study, regardless of the intentions of the speaker.

This is not to say, however, that such examples of speech do not carry with them some unique features. Some of these may be due to technical necessity: the need to “project” one’s voice on the stage, to alter the relative emphasis of various frequencies to compensate for the limitations of electronic equipment, and the like. Others may be intentional distortions, as in the use of “compression” in television commercials and FM radio broadcasts, which is often perceived as an increase in volume by the listener. But in this essay, I will examine the results of

a desire for “credibility” in the speech of actors by means of that of Peter Sellers’ Inspector Clouseau character in the *Pink Panther* films.

English speaking audiences delighted in Sellers’ “hilarious fake French accent” (Blumenfeld 2002, p. 196), while the French seemed to take great offense at the antics of Inspector Clouseau. One might think it is the “slapstick” form of comedy to which the French object, were it not for their love of pantomime and the physicality of acting in general, as exemplified in a comedic sense by the almost deific reverence of the French public for the American buffoon as played by Jerry Lewis. No, it must be something else about Clouseau. I wonder if it could be the accent itself that caused the offense. That which so offended the French had the English speaking movie-going public rolling in the aisles with laughter. What, I wondered, is going on here. A phonological analysis may reveal something, but if I hoped to draw any conclusions, I needed a standard of comparison.

Fortunately, I was able to find two excellent books on the subject of producing accents for the stage, and both addressed the means of production of a French accent in English. My aim here is to use the information gleaned from these two sources to see why Sellers’ accent is convincing and at the same time so funny.

In his book *Accents: A Manual for Actors*, the amazing Robert Blumenfeld focuses on “a particular aspect of the English language: the accents with which it is spoken, native and foreign” (2002, p. 2). Blumenfeld’s aim is to provide actors with a method of mimicking the accent of foreign speakers that is believable to an audience. Interestingly, Blumenfeld assumes a possible accord between a specialized sense of Saussurian “langue” on the one hand and “parole” on the other, in regard to foreign accents: “If you [the actor] are convinced [in regard to the authenticity of your accent], your audience will be” (ibid, p. 26). This implies that there is indeed some

generally accepted, if not explicit, standard in regard to foreign accents produced for the stage. Blumenfeld's credibility in this regard is bolstered by the fact that he is well aware of the science of phonology, a fact attested to by an extensive Selected Bibliography, which includes many standard scholarly phonological texts.

Equally, or perhaps even more, erudite is the volume *Foreign Dialects: A Manual for Actors, Directors, and Writers* by Lewis and Marguerite Herman. The authors use musical notation to indicate what they call "lilt". As is done in musical notation, sounds are assigned a frequency and time duration via this notation. No bibliography is given here, but the book contains phonological rules for producing foreign dialects, and though they do not use the IPA alphabet, they provide a cross-reference between the symbols they do use and those of the IPA. The phonological rules are so numerous (there are dozens for French), and well detailed that one might think that there is a dialect of French-sounding English, presumably heard only in the realm of public performance, with its own distinct phonology.

So what is necessary to convince an *English* speaking audience that it is hearing a native *French* speaker speaking English with a French accent? Must one follow all the phonological rules of Herman and Herman or is it enough to be convinced of the believability of one's own accent as is recommended by Blumenfeld? Surely, the members of the audience have not analyzed the phonology of their own language, and unless they are trained linguists, they would have little specific information about French phonology. However, if it is possible to convince an audience of non-French speaking individuals that one's French accent is authentic, surely that audience must share some criteria upon which a common judgment would be made.

Blumenfeld gives his aspiring French-accented thespian five options in creating an accent ranging from "very slight" to "very heavy" (ibid, p. 199). As one might expect, the phonology

gets more complicated as the accent becomes heavier. I summarize Blumenfeld's five levels, which are described in his book on pages 197 – 201, as follows:

1. **Very slight** – lips forward, apex of tongue slightly behind the teeth, muscles at corners of mouth held taut, active lips and tongue, avoid relaxation of vocal apparatus.
2. **Light** – add phrasal stress (instead of individual word stress) to the above (cf. p. 200).
3. **Slightly heavier** – include all of the above, plus a normal American [®] with the lips forward, and add one “most important” (ibid, p. 198) French sound, which does not exist in English:
 - a. drop the English [h]
 - b. [l] pronounced with the apex in back of the upper front teeth and the vocal cavity formed as it is to pronounce the /o/ in *work*, [ɛ]
 - c. [z] and [d], or in the case of Canadian French, [s] and [t] are substituted for [D] and [T], respectively.
 - d. Substitute [‘‘] for [®]
 - e. Substitute [y] for [i]
 - f. Substitute [o] for [oʊ].
4. **Heavier** – “add pitch patterns to the stress patterns” (ibid, p. 199).
5. **Very heavy** – “nasalize vowels before single [n] in the middle of a word” (ibid, p. 199). Add *all* the “most important” sounds in #3 above. Blumenfeld writes: “you will [now] be pronouncing English as if it were French”. How convincing would a “very heavy” French accent be? Blumenfeld cites the example of one French announcer, speaking English with a heavy accent to be “virtually incomprehensible” (ibid, p. 199).

Certainly, a successful French accent in English should not be incomprehensible. I have known people who could not understand Sellers' Inspector Clouseau, but I think a vast majority of the movie audience *does* understand him, because without that understanding (and some insight into the French accent he uses), the *Pink Panther* movies would be reduced to inane

slapstick. But these movies are *not* vacuous attempts to summon laughter from a pratfall. One can watch them over and over again, and as one does so, the genius of the enterprise reveals itself, and often that genius is found in the interplay of language.

For the purpose of phonological examination, I have chosen a scene from the fifth *Pink Panther* movie for transcription using the IPA alphabet. With four earlier movies in which he played Inspector Clouseau under his belt, Sellers must surely have developed great proficiency in his fake French accent by the time this scene was filmed. Let's take a look, then, at a scene from the last of the *Pink Panther* movies, *Trail of the Pink Panther*, with an analytical perspective.

From Scene 6, "A Simple Request":

Deskman: (murmurs to himself)

[:jEs]

Yes?!

Clouseau: [:doyav fç:' ' :mi: d' :mE:s a:Z : ']

Do you have for me the massage?

Deskman: [oU h ']

Oh! Heh.

[ju wA)n ' :mQs A:Z :eI]

You wanna massage, eh?

Clouseau: [If jy :ha:v w'n fç:' ' :mi: :jE:s]

If you have one for me, yes.

Deskman: [hi:' waI ' n tS tçI :tçUk joU :lI]

Here – Why don't you try Tokyo Lil

[Di E:nd ' D' :blAk]

the end of the block?

[A:sk f' :pQ Sn :flA w' :SE: li]

Ask for "Passion Flower Shirley"

[Di :joU k' :hA: mA :b' t' flçI]

the Yokohama Butterfly.

Clouseau: [ːˈn dˈ :weI Sˈd aI :du:DatH]

And why should I do that?

Deskman: [/l :jˈ wA: nA mA :sA: doUt| tS]

Well, you want a massage don't you?

Clouseau: [jE:s bˈt| aI :want it fˈˈm :jy:]

Yes, but I want it from you.

Deskman: [sˈ :/aI doU/ :gI:v mQ :sA:dZ Is]

Sir, I don't give massages.

Clouseau: [bˈt jy :ge:v mi wˈn :Pn li: Dˈs :mø ni)N]

But you gave me one only this morning.

Deskman: [si :jˈ mIs :teI kˈn]

See, you're mistaken!

Clouseau: [lPk :dˈntH jy :t@aI dˈ :tˈˈIks A):N :glaI wID :mi
mis :jyˈˈ]

Look, don't you try the tricks Anglais with me, Monsieur!

[aI :ˈˈ si:v dˈ :ˈ dˈ :mEs A:•Z :ˈ DEs :mç:ˈˈ ni)N :gˈ]

I received the massage this morning

[fˈˈm I:n :spEk dç :kwi:m la:n :dˈ ˈv Di :jaˈˈ dˈ]

from Inspector Queensland of the Yard

[ˈv :skˈt la:n :dˈ]

of Scotland.

Deskman: [Dˈ :mEs A:Z]

The message!

Clouseau: [ːa:nd it wˈz :jy Dat| :geIv it ty :mi]

and it was you that gave it to me.

Deskman: [ːmE sIdZ]

Message!

Clouseau: [wˈtH]

What?

Deskman: [ːju mi:n :mE sIdZ]

You mean: "message"!

Clouseau: [lyk aI :ny w'tH aI :mi:n jy :ly:n ' tik]

Look, I know what I mean, you lunatic!

[n' :dy jy ç' :dy jy :nçtH hQv fç:'' :mi d' :mas
a:Z :']

Now, do you or do you not have for me the massage?

Deskman: [:noU s' fç :ju: D'r I:z :n'U :mQs A:dZ]

No Sir, for you there is no message!

[:@As mç: h'UU :tEl]

Rasmore Hotel

Man on Phone: [I:n :spEk t' :klu:s]

Inspector Clous...

Deskman: [g'd :I:v ni:N]

Good Evening...

['U]

Oh.

[i:dZ's went| : 'p tHI:z :@u:m]

He just went up to his room.

[çIl :rI:Nk]

I'll ring.

Man on Phone: [TQnk ju]

Thank you.

Clouseau: [:jEs Dis I:z :tSif i:n :spEk dç :kly z'U2]

Yes, this is chief inspector Clouseau.

Maid: [tE:n jE :bEd| dç:n s']

Turn your bed down, Sir.

Man on Phone: [:kly z'U]

Clouseau!

[kly :z'U]

Clouseau!

[wEr :a: ju]

Where are you?

[kly :z'U]

Clouseau!

[kan ju :hi' mi]

Can you hear me?

[:kly z'U]

Clouseau!

Clouseau: [jEs jy wE'' :seI I:ng]

Yes, you were saying...

Man on Phone: [kly :z'U]

Clouseau!

[:Id j't]

Idiot!

[kan ju :hi' mi]

Can you hear me?

(Unintelligible)

[:kly :z'U]

Clouseau!

[wEr :a: ju]

Where are you?

[:kly z'U]

Clouseau!

[kan ju :hi' mi]

Can you hear me?

[:kly :z'U]

Clouseau!

[:kly z'U]

Clouseau!

Clouseau: [na :D'n w'tH w'z :DatH jy wE:'' :seI i:N]

Now then, what was that you were saying?

Deskman: [j' :mQs A:dZ]

Your message!

Clouseau: [jE: ' ' : feUn]

Your phone!

In this scene, the Deskman becomes phonologically confused, as though being drawn into Clouseau's accent. This is surely intentional, with the Deskman first pronouncing *message* [:mE s A:Z], then switching to [:mE s I dZ] and ending with [:mQ s A: dZ]. Note that the stress stays on the first syllable in all three examples, as it would in the pronunciation of English *message*, but the first vowel changes from [E] to [Q] and the second vowel changes from [A:] to [I] and back to [A:] as the Deskman changes his pronunciation from Clouseau's French to English, and then, exasperated, to a hybrid.

The sibilant [s], switches syllables from 1 > 2 > 1, indicating a sequence of *massage* > *message* > *mes/mas/sage*. The only thing the Deskman does correctly is establish the correct English stress, retain the initial consonant [m], and correct the ending [Z] to [dZ]. The Man on the Phone, on the other hand, does not maintain the stress. Because the audience hears the man's voice as it would sound over a telephone held away from the ear, the phonological sounds are difficult to identify, but the stress is quite clear, as the man enunciates all the possible permutations of stress on the inspector's last name: [:k l y z ' U], [k l y : z ' U], [:k l y : z ' U]. All of this might escape the notice of the casual viewer, but it so carefully corresponds to natural error that it could hardly be gratuitous, especially since it is the Englishman making the errors of a *French* speaker in his own language! Clouseau is not just a bumbling idiot: everyone who comes into contact with him becomes like him – right down to the phonology they use. Why include such detailed minutiae in the scene? My feeling is that it creates a deeper realization of phonological horseplay, which is, after all, a major theme of the film. A careful examination of any serious work of art reveals intent on more than one level. This is one reason that works of art continue to inform us upon repeated examination, and the *Pink Panther* series of films are no

exception. A look at the actual film will reveal that there are all sorts of visual jokes that occur at the same time as, in the telling words of Clouseau, these *tricks Anglais*.

One cannot help noticing that Sellers' Clouseau is played in a serious mode throughout. Sellers can be observed holding the phonological articulators in just the fashion recommended by Blumenfeld under #1 (very slight) above: lips forward, corners of mouth held taut, etc. The phrasal stress is immediately obvious, fulfilling condition #2 (light).

As for sound substitution, Sellers avoids heavy emphasis on the stereotypical exaggerated sounds employed by many French imitators. The [h] is dropped in Clouseau's first line in the scene, [doyav], "do you have", and is retained in the second instance, [ha:v], which does not seem obvious, probably due to the correct French pronunciation of the [a] which follows it. Sellers' [l]'s are correctly pronounced, maintaining the necessary rhoticization of the surrounding sounds. His dentals are never pronounced with the exaggerated, and often overused [z]. Because that would sound as though Sellers was over-playing the accent, he sticks with [s], and he mixes [d] and a somewhat de-aspirated [D] when English dentals are called for, again avoiding a stereotypical approach. There is, however, full substitution of [ʹ] for [®] throughout, and in fact his groans as he repeatedly falls out the window are backed and rhoticized, a hilarious touch. [y] is substituted for [i] with heavy emphasis. Finally, Sellers delivers a master comedic touch when a French version of the English [oU] is called for. Instead of using Blumenfeld's [o] for [oU], substituting the pure vowel of French for the English diphthong, Sellers employs the rounded schwa [ɐ] in the word *only*, the schwa [ʹ] in the word *don't*, and [eU] in the word *phone* at the end of the scene which matches up perfectly with the glottal [ʹ] in the word *your* which precedes it. For my money, these are the subtle touches, which make the accent so funny. Sellers avoids heavy nasalization of vowels before [n], as suggested by Blumenfeld for the

production of a “heavy accent”, presumably because its use would have impaired intelligibility as it did for Blumenfeld’s radio announcer.

Herman and Herman begin their recommendations with ‘lilt’ (intonation) and “emphasis” (stress), and then move into “the French Nasal”. As Sellers’ nasalization is quite light, and as Herman and Herman give three rules for nasalization, it might be profitable to see if Sellers ignores these rules, meaning they are unnecessary to *convince* an audience (although heavy nasals are certainly thought of as very “French” by most English speakers). Blumenfeld cautions against over-emphasis here (2002, p. 199), and so do Herman and Herman: “Then nasals must not be forced or unduly stressed or they will throw the whole dialect out of focus. The vowel sounds are not always nasalized as is often and erroneously believed. The vowels are nasalized only under certain conditions and certain definite changes take place when the nasalization occurs” (1997, p. 125).

The conditions and changes that are referred to may be summarized with three rules:

1. nasal consonant > Ø/ nasalized V) ____.
2. vowels are nasalized only before a single (non-geminated) [m] or [n] followed by another consonant.
3. When [n] is word final, and the following word begins with a vowel, the preceding vowel is not nasalized.

Sellers does not emphasize nasals, yet he fails to follow rule 1: [:mç: ‘ ‘ ni)N :g ´], [A):N :glaI]. The same data show that he does follow rule 2, and we have no examples in the data to which rule 3 would apply, unless a glide is counted as a vowel, in which case Sellers follows rule 3: [lyk aI :ny w´tH aI :mi:n jy :ly:n ´ tik]. So we can summarize by saying that Sellers maintains nasals, even in contradiction of the rules, but that does not mean

that he emphasizes them, as so many others do, in producing a French accent. The result is a clear, understandable articulation issued with an accent that is unmistakably French.

Conclusion

Sellers' French accent is believable because he is consistent and natural in his pronunciation. He avoids heavy nasalization and the voiced alveolars so often overdone in less convincing attempts. His caricatures, if they may even be called that, are exaggerations of the already strong French characteristics of fronting and rounding vowels, rhoticization, and an over-emphasis on final [ʰ] in pronouncing English. The phonological play in the speech of supporting cast members may point the listener to the subtleties in Sellers' accent. I doubt very much that any of this was due to mere imitation of a native speaker. It must be the result of careful analysis and hours of painstaking practice. It is a caricature of rare delicacy, and one that might serve as an example to the often ham-handed attempts at foreign accents evident in many modern-day films.

References

Blumenfeld, Robert. *Accents: A Manual for Actors*. New York: Limelight, 2002.

Herman, Lewis and Herman, Marguerite. *Foreign Dialects: A Manual for Actors, Directors, and Writers*. New York: Routledge, 1997.

Pickett, Joseph P., Executive Editor, *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, fourth edition*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000.