JOLANTA SZPYRA-KOZŁOWSKA
Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Lublin
jolanta.szpyra-kozlowska@poczta.umcs.lublin.pl

AGNIESZKA BRYŁA-CRUZ
Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Lublin
agnieszka.bryla@poczta.umcs.lublin.pl

PHONETICS AND HOLLYWOOD. ACCURACY AND CREDIBILITY OF IMITATED POLISH ACCENTS IN *SOPHIE'S CHOICE* AND *THE ZOOKEEPER'S WIFE*

Abstract

In many American films actors and actresses, native speakers of English who impersonate foreign characters, make an attempt to speak English with a foreign accent. The present paper is the first attempt at analyzing imitated Polish-accented English in two well-known Hollywood productions. It examines, compares and assesses the most salient phonetic properties of the accents employed by two American stars: Meryl Streep appearing as Zofia Zawistowska in *Sophie's Choice* (1982) and Jessica Chastain playing the role of Antonina Żabińska in *The Zookeeper's Wife* (2017). The major goal, however, is to study the perception of the two accents in order to establish whether they can be regarded as cases of genuine Polish-English speech. The analysis is carried out by means of a three-step procedure. First, a list of typical features of a Polish accent in English is established in consultation with several specialists in Polish English pronunciation. Next, both actresses' accents are examined with regard to these properties. In the third stage their speech and two samples of a genuine Polish-English accent are assessed by a group of 100 participants (66 Polish students and 34 native speakers of English) in a perception study. The obtained results show that M. Streep's accent is more accurate and contains more features of authentic Polish English than J. Chastain's, which is reflected in the Polish listeners' credibility judgements. Nevertheless, native English listeners view the two actresses' accents as Polish to a similar extent.

1. Introduction

In many American films actors and actresses, native speakers of English who imper-sonate foreign characters, make an attempt to speak English with a foreign accent, which, for obvious reasons, is not genuine, but imitated.[1] This is expressed by a film critic who claims that "when American films tell a story that is set in a foreign coun-try, the actors and actresses in those movies often speak a slightly funny version of English with an accent that is supposed to correspond to the language of the country where the story is based" (Patenttranslator's Blog, online). Similarly, when foreign-ers appear in films with the plot located in English-speaking countries, the actors often put on a foreign accent. As argued by Walshe (2009: 1), "when people watch a film, they want to hear the actors speak with the accents and dialects which are typical of the place in which the film is set. When this is not the case, they are quick to voice their dismay".

The importance and quality of imitated accents are frequently commented on by film reviewers who approach this phenomenon, however, in a variety of ways. Some claim that foreign-accented speech is crucial for the creation of genuine characters, others criticize it as distracting, annoying and even incomprehensible to the audi-ence. According to an accent coach Pamela Vanderway, "if your rhythm, speech, movement, facial expressions (…) are in line with the story being told, the audience is with you 100 percent; if any one of those is off-kilter, the audience is pulled out of the action and either doubts the validity of the story or doubts your ability as an actor" (Strassberg 2014, online). Walshe (2010: 97) also argues that "the onus is on the actor to sound like one of the locals or else risk the ridicule of critics and audi-ence alike". Negative consequences of poorly imitated pronunciation are described as follows: "(…) the accents in that film struck me as impossible and phony to such an extent that I could not concentrate on the plot of the movie" (patenttranslator.wordpress.com).[2] What might be ever more confusing is the fact that in many films several fake accents can be found. For example in *The Unbearable Lightness of Be-ing*, a film from the 1980s set in Prague, Swedish actress Lena Olin, French actress Juliette Binoche and English actor Daniel Day-Lewis speak English with different pseudo-Czech accents, heavily influenced by their native languages.

Some question the logic of employing accented speech, as shown in the following quotations: "Why should Poles be speaking English with Polish accents in Poland?" (Crucchiola et al. 2017, online) and "(…) why give a foreign accent to a character who is speaking her own language in the first place?" The latter critic provides a pos-sible explanation of this feature: "(…) the answer might be that this is a theatrical convention, a kind of shortcut, which an audience readily accepts for the sake of recognizing that the protagonists, who, although they are speaking English for the purposes of being understood, are not actually English or American" (The Krakow

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[1]   Genuine accents are also referred to as authentic or real while imitated accents as fake, mim-icked, simulated, stage / screen accents or pseudo-accents.

[2]   The author refers here to the imitated German accents in *The Book Thief*.

Post, online). Others stress the importance of accent accuracy, for instance, a dialect coach quoted by Gausnell (2016, online), who claims that "the goal is to make the dialect authentic to the point that it blends with the character, leaving the audience with the impression that the actor just speaks that way".

Many researchers claim that the use of foreign accents is a result of "Hollywood's preference for stars whose first language is English to play the main characters" (Bleichenbacher 2008: 63). He also notes that "different characters display different degrees of accent strength (not clear whether intentional or depending on the actor's individual abilities)" and adds that accents are often used to distinguish negative characters from the more positive (Blechchenbacher 2008: 63). Lippi-Green (1997: 102) argues that "the more sexually available and attractive a female character, the less distinctive her accent". A somewhat cavalier approach to foreign accents in many films and their inauthenticity is often interpreted in the following way: "(…) the only audience the film director cares about are people who speak only English. Authenticity[3] is unimportant when it comes to pronunciation of words in a foreign language" (Patenttranslator's Blog, online). Another critic also maintains that the actors' task is imitating the accent of foreign speakers that is credible to an audience adding that only an English-speaking audience is meant (Blumenfeld 2002, online). A successful foreign accent cannot be too heavy, however, because it must be comprehensible to the viewers.

Hodson (2014), in her book devoted to dialects in films and literature, draws attention to one more significant aspect of the use of language varieties in fiction. She argues that while filmgoers bring their existing knowledge about dialects to a film, they also take ideas about them from that film. In other words, in many cases the viewers' knowledge about a particular variety of language may be acquired from films rather than from the real world. This means that audiences with no exposure to genuine foreign accents are likely to shape their ideas about them on the basis of imitated pronunciation. The quality of these accents is therefore of much importance as it can contribute to the formation of accent-related stereotypes.

As noted by Walshe (2010: 97), there are several sources of information on accents actors can use. They can employ the existing examples of accents in the media, but as many of them are inaccurate, there is a risk of "imitating imitations" and falling "into the trap of stereotyping". Secondly, actors can use handbooks written especially to teach them accents. However, according to Walshe, who has examined several such books with regard to Irish English, the majority of them contain errors and perpetuate cultural stereotypes. Finally, "actors who work in film and television, are generally fortunate enough to have a dialect coach on hand to teach them the

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[3]   As argued by Walshe (2009), as fake accents are never authentic (just like even faithful copies of paintings are only copies), it is more justified to describe them in terms of accuracy. It should be added that the concept of authenticity, though not examined from the perspective of imitated accents, has been approached from a variety of perspectives, e.g. philosophical, anthropological and sociolinguistic, particularly the latter one (e.g. Coupland 2003). For reasons of space limitations we cannot discuss this interesting issue in more detail.

requisite accent" (Walshe 2010: 97). In the latter case the quality of accent coaching is of primary importance.

While the actors' imitated accents are often commented on in many film reviews, such assessments are impressionistic and superficial, e.g *X wrestles to sound as Polish as possible, but the results are not great,* which is to be expected as film critics (and their readers) are not phoneticians to carry out such evaluations competently.[4] Surprisingly little attention, however, has been given so far to simulated accents in films by L2 pronunciation and accented speech perception specialists (with some notable exceptions, e.g. Walshe's [2009] analysis of Irish English in 50 films).

The present paper is the first attempt at analyzing imitated Polish-accented English in two well-known Hollywood productions in terms of their phonetic accuracy and, first and foremost, credibility. It examines, compares and assesses the most salient phonetic properties of fake Polish accents employed by two American stars: the Oscar-winning Meryl Streep appearing as Zofia Zawistowska in *Sophie's Choice* (1982) and Jessica Chastain playing the role of Antonina Żabińska in a recent film *The Zookeeper's Wife* (2017). This is done with a view of preparing the necessary background for a study of the perception of their pronunciation by Polish and English native listeners and their opinion whether the two actresses' speech can be regarded as instances of genuine Polish English.

In spite of the 35 years which passed between the making of the two movies, a comparison of the two actresses' accents is fully justified; both characters share a number of characteristics: they are young, well-educated Polish women of a similar age (early thirties) entangled in the dramatic events of World War II in Poland.[5] The comparison of the two accents is particularly interesting in view of the fact that while Meryl Streep's Polish-English pronunciation has been praised as close to the original, Jessica Chastain's accent has been rather severely criticized as strikingly inauthentic. We intend to find out whether such opinions are justified by reporting on a perception study in which 100 participants, both native and non-native speakers of English, assessed the credibility of the two accents.

The analysis is carried out by means of a three-step procedure. First, a list of 10 typical features of a Polish accent in English is established in consultation with several specialists in Polish English pronunciation. Next both actresses' Polish accents are examined with regard to their accuracy, i.e. the presence or absence of the 10 salient properties in their speech and their ability to suppress those features which are typical of native English, but not Polish English. Finally, but most importantly, samples of their speech are assessed by a group of 66 Polish students majoring in English in a perception study in order to establish their credibility, that is whether both actresses' accents are regarded by the listeners as genuine Polish-English speech. The results are juxtaposed with those obtained in the examination of the perception of the same samples by 34 native speakers of English.

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4   In this paper many film critics' opinions are provided as often they are the only sources of comments on the Polish accents used in Hollywood productions.

5   Moreover, their personalities share some features as they are both gentle, delicate and feminine.

2. Polish accents in English

The most salient features of the Polish accent in English have been described briefly in various pronunciation manuals (e.g. Kenworthy 1987; Avery, Ehrlich 1992; Rogerson-Revell 2012) and examined in more detail in many other studies (e.g. Sobkowiak 1996; Swan, Smith 2001; Bryła-Cruz 2016). Their communicative significance, however, varies in that while all features which depart from native pronunciation can be considered indicative of a foreign accent, some of them affect also the intelligibility of accented speech (Szpyra-Kozłowska 2015; Bryła-Cruz 2016). It should also be added that obviously there is nothing like a single Polish accent in English as there are probably as many different Polish-English interlanguages as there are speakers of this variety.[6]

In order to establish the most typical features of Polish-accented English, we asked several Polish scholars specializing in Polish-English phonetics to chose 10 of them from a list of 30 such properties prepared by the authors, who are experienced researchers in this area of study.[7] 10 features which have been indicated most frequently are given below, divided into several categories:[8]

Spelling pronunciation (local errors):
1. The use of spelling pronunciation (local errors), e.g. *foreign* pronounced as [fɔˈrɛjn].

Consonants:
2. Word-final devoicing of obstruents, e.g. *bed* pronounced as *bet*.
3. The incorrect pronunciation of the interdental fricatives, e.g. *they* pronounced as *day*.
4. The pronunciation of the velar nasal with the following velar plosive, particularly in word-final position, e.g. *bring* pronounced as *brink*.
5. The rhotic often pronounced as a trill whenever it is written, e.g. in *dark, car, floor*.

Vowels:
6. Failure to make a distinction between /iː/ and /ɪ/, and the use of Polish /i/ in all instances, e.g. in sister, big, his.
7. Failure to make a distinction between /e/ (get), /ɜː/ (girl), /ə/ (teacher) and /æ/ (happy), and the use of Polish /ɛ/ in all instances.
8. Failure to make a length distinction between long and short vowels.
9. Failure to use vowel reduction, e.g. *correct* pronounced as [kɔˈrɛkt].

Word stress:
10. Incorrect word stress, e.g. *development* pronounced as *deveLOPment*.

Thus, the phoneticians we consulted are of the opinion that the most typical features of Polish-English accent include several types of consonant mispronunciations, problems with vowel quality and quantity as well as the incorrect placement of word stress and frequent cases of spelling-induced forms.

It should be added that a foreign accent is always a matter of strength, which means that not all English-speaking Poles employ all of the above features. Thus, the heavier someone's Polish accent in English is, the more of these properties are likely to occur in their speech. The opposite is also true, of course.

In what follows we examine Meryl Streep's and Jessica Chastain's Polish accents in *Sophie's Choice* and *The Zookeeper's Wife* with regard to these features, that is attempt to characterize the accuracy of their imitated pronunciation. Moreover, an important aspect of the examined accents concerns those phonetic properties which are typical of native English and are rarely or never found in Polish-English. They include, for instance, the replacement of Polish prepalatals with English palatoalveolars, the aspiration of the fortis plosives (unaspirated in Polish), the use of dark 'l' (Polish employs only clear 'l').[9] We will also point out those pronunciation features which are found neither in native English nor in Polish-English, e.g. the softening (palatalization) of velar consonants before front mid vowels (*had* pronounced as [xʲed]). The analysis involved the whole films and was carried out auditorily,[10] in order to be similar to the perception study in Section 5. No statistical data on the number of correct and incorrect renditions of the actresses' pronunciation features are provided for several reasons. First, the technical quality of the copies of *Sophie's Choice* available to us does not allow for such exact measurements, while in the case of *The Zookeeper's Wife* Jessica Chastain's speech is often so quiet (see a critic's comment quoted in Section 4) that it makes an exact count of various features impossible. Secondly, since the focus of this study is on accent perception, such details are irrelevant to film viewers who, in their judgements, are guided by impressions and not statistical details.

3. Meryl Streep's Polish accent in *Sophie's Choice*

In Alan J. Pakula's 1982 film Meryl Streep plays the role of Zofia Zawistowska, a Polish Auschwitz survivor, who, after traumatic experiences of World War II, found herself in the United States. An important part of the character's identity and authenticity is her Polish accent in English, regarded by many critics as the actress's major achievement, which contributed greatly to her winning an Academy Award in 1983.[11]

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9   In a simulated accent analysis, as argued by Neuhauser and Simpson (2007: 4), "missing features typical of a particular language together with the presence of other atypical features can indicate that an accent is being imitated".

10 The analysis of the two accents was carried out independently by the two authors. The results were then compared and discussed. Avoidance of acoustic details in this paper was also motivated by the wish to widen the paper's readership to include not only phoneticians.

11 As a matter of fact in some scenes Zofia speaks Polish and German, the latter with an allegedly Polish accent.

A typical opinion of one of them is the following: "There are a few great examples in which the work and effort put into the voice acting has proved to be almost perfect. (…) Among nearly flawless attempts at foreign accents is Meryl Streep's role in *Sophie's Choice*. (…) Although Streep has many profound examples of great accents and dialects (…), nothing really comes close to the dedication and precision that was used in her role as Sophie in *Sophie's Choice*" (Taste of Cinema, online). Other critics share this opinion as shown in the selection of quotations taken from several film reviews: "Meryl Streep speaks English in that movie with what I thought was very authentic Polish accent" (Patenttranslator's Blog, online), "Streep plays the Brooklyn scenes with an enchanting Polish-American accent (she has the first accent I've ever wanted to hug)" (Ebert 2008: 714), "Streep definitely succeeded in giving a believable Polish accent, and this combined with commanding performance in itself, let her win her first Oscar statuette" (Taste of Cinema, online), "her Polish accent is impeccable" (Rowe 1982, online), "her impeccably accurate Polish accent" (Dukore 1985: 172).

What we learn from various Internet sources is that Meryl Streep, in her preparations for the role of Zofia spent several months learning to speak Polish for 5–6 hours a day in order to give a believable portrayal of a Polish refugee.[12] According to William Styron, the author of the novel on which the film was based, "she studied for four or five months under a Polish voice coach, or language coach, until she learned the accents of the language perfectly" (Strandberg, Buwa 1991: 202). Moreover, an inspiration for Streep's accent was a Polish actress Elżbieta Czyżewska, whose personality and manner of speaking impressed her very much. In our analysis we will study the accuracy of Zofia's accent and see whether it deserves the praises it has received.

Spelling pronunciation (local errors)

As mentioned in Section 2, spelling pronunciation can frequently be found in Polish English. No such cases have been found in Zofia, who pronounces many words difficult for Poles correctly, e.g. *autobiographical, tuberculosis, exterminated, crematorium, developmental.*

Consonants

As pointed out earlier, the pronunciation of the interdental fricatives is problematic for Polish learners in whose native language these sounds are absent. Zofia does not use interdentals in her speech, fairly consistently replacing them with [t] (e.g. in

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[12] It is worth mentioning that Zofia's English is often ungrammatical in a rather illogical way. For example, she notoriously fails to use the Past Simple tense correctly (e.g. *she start to die, I didn't went to live*) but has no problem with perfect forms (e.g. *we would've left*) and more complex constructions such as the Future Perfect tense (e.g. *we will have been saved*). It is unlikely for an English-speaking Pole to have problems with the relatively simple past forms and master complex grammatical structures which have no equivalents in Polish.

Nathan, something, think) and [d] (*that, these, father, mother*).[13] This certainly contributes to creating the impression of a Polish accent.

There are two problems that Poles have with the English rhotic approximant. The first of them is the articulation of this consonant in Polish as an alveolar trill or tap.[14] Another issue concerns the distribution of /r/, which in Polish appears in every word position, i.e. whenever it is written, as in the rhotic accents of English, such as American English.[15] Zofia's pronunciation of this sound is inconsistent; she tends to use the trill mainly in consonant clusters (e.g. in *problem, breakfast, property*), but rarely in other contexts (e.g. in *rapid, real, married*). In the latter case she frequently realizes the rhotic as an approximant. As to the distribution of the consonant in question, Zofia's pronunciation is variably rhotic. She often pronounces [r] before consonants, e.g. in *heard, skirt, careful,* while in other cases, mostly word-finally, she uses r-colouring, e.g. in *lover, mother, father.*

The velar nasal is problematic for Poles if it is not followed by a velar plosive. Hence, the plosive is frequently added before vowels (*singer* > PE [sʲiŋgɛr]), word finally (*bring* > PE [brʲiŋk]) and before non-velars (*sings* > PE [sʲiŋks]).[16] Zofia often does pronounce voiced velar plosives in these contexts, e.g. in *long, meaning, feeling,* but fails to devoice them. No plosive, however, occurs in her versions of *rushing, young* and *something.*

In Section 2 we pointed out that word-final obstruent devoicing is a feature which is usually carried over to English by Polish learners.[17] The analysis of Zofia's obstruents in this position shows lack of consistency with respect to voicing. Thus, in some cases completely voiceless consonants can be heard in, e.g. *age, calls, please,* while in other items voiced segments are pronounced, e.g. *good, means, believe.* The instances of voicing retention are more frequent than devoicing.

A few comments are also needed on some other properties of Zofia's consonants. A striking feature, completely absent in Polish English, is the palatalization of velars before front vowels. This can be observed in such cases as *have, had, hate, heard, careful, came, case, getting, ghetto* (but not in *hello, ham, can't*), which makes Zofia sound Russian.

Some other features rare in Polish English and typical of American English, are present in Zofia's pronunciation. She uses dark 'l' consistently, e.g. in *life, selling, lover,* while the lateral is always clear in Polish. It also lacks syllabic consonants,

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[13]   There are some exceptions, such as her perfectly American pronunciation of *Catholic.*

[14]   According to Stolarski's (2015) experimental evidence, the Polish rhotic is usually pronounced as a tap.

[15]   The presence of the rhotic in English is often manifested through r-colouring of the preceding vowel rather than its consonantal realization (Wells 1982).

[16]   The voicing of the plosive depends on its position in a word. When final or in word final clusters, it is devoiced.

[17]   This is not to say that word final devoicing is absent from English altogether (e.g. Crutten-den 2014). However, while in Polish pairs of words such as *kot* 'cat' – *kod* 'code' are homophones pronounced as [kɔt], in English items such as *cot – cod* differ with respect to some features, e.g. vowel length, the force of articulation of consonants as well as the presence vs. absence of some degree of aspiration of final plosives.

problematic for learners of English, particularly if a vowel letter intervenes between the two consonants. Zofia, however, employs them consistently, e.g. in *Sweden, German, American.* Another frequent difficulty for Poles is the pronunciation of English palatoalveolars, absent in Polish, in which corresponding consonants are postalveolar. Zofia pronounces these sounds in a perfect English way, e.g. in *shame, Jewish, church.*

Vowels

In Polish English there is a strong tendency to replace English [ɪ] with Polish fully front [i]. Zofia does it, but only occasionally, e.g. in *American, beautiful, forgive* but not in the majority of cases, e.g. in *dinner, live, six,* in which she employs the native English vowel quality.

Poles have notorious problems with the ash vowel, absent in Polish, replacing it with either P [ɛ] or P [a], both of which can be found in Zofia's speech, used by her, however, in a somewhat random fashion. For example, she pronounces the vowel in *marry* and *married* sometimes as P [a] and on other occasions as P [ɛ]. Similarly, she realizes the vowel in *ham* variably as P [ɛ], P [a] and E [æ].

The quality of Zofia's other vowels is not stable either and often varies from word to word. For instance, Polish-like monophthongs can be heard in her realizations of *don't, only, Polish,* but proper English diphthongs appear in *told, Poland* and *ghetto.* The actress pronounces the final vowel in *Stingo* variably as an AE [ɔʊ] diphthong or a P [ɔ] monophthong. The back long E [aː] sound, as in *dark,* in her performance usually resembles more front P [a], both in terms of length and quality, but the vowel in *book* and *good* sounds perfectly English and unlike fully back P [u].

A typical Polish-English accent feature is the failure to employ vowel reduction, both in single words and in phrases. Zofia uses full unreduced vowels in the initial syllables in *professor, police* and *concern,* and produces some kind of P [ɔ] in the final syllables of *Dickinson* and *doctor.* Her version of *paradise* contains two P [a]-like vowels. She is not consistent in this respect, however, and pronounces final schwas in *dinner, father* and *Jesus* as well as in weak forms of function words in such phrases as *was afraid, at work, of course.* A reduced vowel is also present in *good* in such phrases as *good night* and *good morning,* which is rarely done by English-speaking Poles. This means that in terms of rhythm, Zofia's speech is stress-timed, as in English, rather than syllable-timed, as in Polish and Polish English.[18]

Word stress

Poles, with Polish fixed penultimate stress, tend to misstress many English words. Zofia does it only once placing the stress in *rea'lize* on the final syllable,[19] which,

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[18]   Another striking prosodic feature of this character is a very high pitch of voice she uses, much higher than Meryl Streep's ordinary voice, which is a reflection of the actress's view of what feminine speech is like. The same is true in the case of Antonina's pronunciation.

[19]   Final stress in this verb is common in Jamaican English.

indeed, can frequently be heard from Polish learners. Nevertheless, in many words with difficult stress pattern the right syllables are stressed, e.g. in *develop'mental, 'persecuted, ri'diculous.*

A general comment on the accent variety used by Zofia is also in order. As pointed out by one of the reviewers, Styron (1979: 93) mentions that she began learning English in a war refugee camp in Sweden a year before coming to America from a Jewish woman from Amsterdam. While it is not clear what language variety it was, we can assume that it was British English, usually taught in Europe before World War II. After over a year of her stay in the USA (the period in which the film story took place) we could expect her to have acquired some features of American English. Indeed, her pronunciation includes both British and American properties. For instance, her [t] is not tapped in *getting* and *thirty*, [n] is not dropped in *winter* and *sentences, after* and *fast* are pronounced by her with BE [aː] rather than AE [æ], and a British [ɒ]-like vowel appears in such items as *got* and *God.* On the other hand, *stupid* and *knew* have no palatal glide in them and *neither* is pronounced in an American fashion with [iː], and not British [aɪ]. Her consistent use of dark 'l' in all the contexts is not part of RP either. While departures from American English pronunciation must have been purposeful on the part of the actress, those which characterize this variety are probably accidental.

Let us sum up our analysis of Meryl Streep's attempt at a Polish accent. She is most successful with her replacement of the dental fricatives with plosives and the production of some Polish-like vowels. We should also appreciate her velar nasals often accompanied by plosives, a trilled rhotic and some devoiced word-final obstruents, all of which are used, however, with little consistency. The most striking features which betray her as not a genuine English-speaking Pole include un-Polish palatalization of velars, the use of dark 'l' and syllabic consonants. In brief, her imitation of Polish accent should certainly be viewed as a remarkable achievement for a native speaker of American English, but, as shown in our analysis, with respect to many features it departs considerably from genuine Polish English accents and cannot be considered perfect, as suggested by many film critics quoted earlier.[20]

4. Jessica Chastain's accent in *The Zookeeper's Wife*

Jessica Chastain plays the role of Polish Antonina Żabińska, who, together with her husband Jan Żabiński, saved over 300 Jews by hiding them in the Warsaw zoo they owned and ran. She worked on her Polish accent with dialogue coach Joan Washington and is claimed by many critics to model it after Meryl Streep in *Sophie's Choice.* They maintain that "her Polish accent owes too much to Meryl Streep's Eastern European lilt from *Sophie's Choice*" (Travers 2017, online), "(…) burdened by a Polish accent that she seems to have borrowed from Meryl Streep's Sophie" (Robinson 2017, online).

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[20]   It should be added that the Polish which the actress uses in some scenes is not convincing either. For example, in Zofia's Thomas Wolfe's poetry reading her Polish is largely incomprehensible.

Yet, even if J. Chastain owes much to M. Streep's attempt at a Polish accent,[21] her endeavours have been heavily criticized. Below we present a representative selection of comments taken from several film reviews: "Jessica Chastain's performance is rich with lovely nuances, but to hear her speak in Russian/Polish-accented English is disruptive to the ear. So hard she must have laboured to nail the accent only to have it effectively sound like a phony artifice that takes the viewer out of the movie" (Baumgarten 2017, online), "Chastain's inconsistent Polish accent calls so much attention to itself that even she seems to be aware of it, lowering her voice to a near whisper throughout. She is surrounded by European actors, all of whom speak English in a variety of accents[22] so her attempt is even more distracting" (O'Malley 2017, online), "(…) but the real work seems to have gone into her oft-unintelligible, Russian-inflected Polish squeak, which too often makes her sound like someone simultaneously defying Nazis and learning English" (Abele 2017, online).[23]

In our analysis we will try to determine whether severe criticism levelled at Jessica Chastain's Polish accent is justified.[24] It should be added from the outset that in the film under consideration she does not speak much, which, combined with the low volume of her voice, makes an examination of all her accent features more difficult than in the case of Zofia.

Spelling pronunciation (local errors)

In Antonina's speech there are only a few cases of spelling-induced mispronunciation, i.e. *company, stomach, comes* and *enough* are pronounced with P-like [ɔ] and not E [ʌ]. Apart from these, there are no such distortions despite the fact that she uses many words whose correct pronunciation is often problematic to Poles, e.g. *desperate, bombing, St. Petersburg.*

Consonants

The actress frequently employs the trilled [r], especially after consonants, e.g. in *draw, true, breathing*, but also word-finally in *war* and *are*, sometimes before a consonant,

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[21] If this observation holds true, this is a case of imitating imitators, mentioned in Section 1.

[22] The other main characters are played by German actor Daniel Bruhl and Flemish actor Johan Heldenbergh speaking English with different accents. This creates "a hodgepodge of different Euro inflections, all of them speaking a language that none of the characters actually did" (Debruge 2017). The critic argues that all these different accents result in that "everyone but Bruhl sounds like a poorly educated Polish immigrant, rather than the fiercely intelligent resistance fighters that they were" (Debruge 2017).

[23] It should be added that as Antonina was brought up in Russia, her Polish pronunciation could have been affected by a Russian accent. As mentioned on p. 10, in Poland, particularly in the period covered by the film, British English pronunciation (RP) was the adopted teaching model. Thus, for the sake of authenticity, Antonina's pronunciation should be based on British English and not American English.

[24] It is interesting to note that *The Zookeeper's Wife* was shown in Polish cinemas mainly in a dubbed version, probably because a diversity of inauthentic polonized accents would be too distracting to the Polish audience.

e.g. in *permission, understand, Warsaw* and before a vowel in *repeat*. It must be stressed, however, that her use of the trill is fairly inconsistent throughout the film and words like *friend*, *hungry*, *trust* are pronounced in two different ways, sometimes with a trill, on other occasions with an approximant.[25]

Antonina's pronunciation lacks many features typical of Polish-accented English. There is no plosive insertion after the velar nasal (e.g. in *morning, darling, long*). She generally realizes the interdentals correctly in, e.g. *anything, nothing, thanks*, with the occasional replacements of the voiced fricative with [d] in *breathing, this, that*. Her word-final obstruents are usually voiced, e.g. in *comes, pig, love,* but are sometimes devoiced, particularly in the case of E /d/ in *husband, friend, died*.

It should also be pointed out that Antonina's speech exhibits numerous allophonic properties of English pronunciation which are usually absent from Polish English, such as aspiration of the fortis plosives in stressed positions, e.g. in *comes, terrible time, pig*, and no audible release in stop clusters, e.g. in *captured, goodbye*. She also employs syllabic consonants, e.g. in *Adam, human, German* and palatoalveolars in *much, strange, children*. The latter sounds, absent in Polish, are particularly noticeable in the Polish names *Ryś, Kasia, Pietrasia* which contain prepalatals, and *Jerzyk* with a voiced postalveolar fricative, all of which are rendered by the actress as English palatoalveolars.[26] Antonina uses the dark 'l' in all items with the lateral, e.g. in *long, telling, sleep*.

Vowels

Antonina generally preserves native English quality and quantity of vowels. More specifically, she maintains the contrast between E [ɪ] and E [iː], and uses E [ɪ] consistently, e.g. in *quick, gift, children*, never replacing it with P [i]. She also keeps the contrast between E [æ] (e.g. *batch*) and E [ʌ] (e.g. *much*) and E [e] (*every*) as well as the contrast between E [ʊ] (*good*) and E [uː] (*soup*). The diphthong [əʊ] is monophthongized by her to P [ɔ] in some words, e.g. *so cold, don't*, but is pronounced as a diphthong in *ghetto, piano, patrol*, in which English-speaking Poles have a tendency to use P [ɔ].

Antonina employs vowel reduction in function words (e.g. in *you found us*, *all of them*, *you can never tell*) as well as in unaccented syllables in single words, e.g. in *husband*, *innocent*, *away*), which results in English stress-timed rhythm instead of Polish syllable-timed rhythm.

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[25]   A detailed analysis of the use of /r/ in *The Zookeeper's Wife* can be found in Szpyra-Kozłowska (2018).

[26]   This feature results in some unintended comic effects. In one of the initial scenes Antonina rescues a baby elephant from suffocating while trying to calm the baby's mother by repeating her name *Kasia* several times. Yet, due to the incorrect pronunciation of the fricative, it sounds more like *kasza* 'buckwheat', spoiling the dramatic scene for Polish viewers.

Word stress

Antonina's placement of stress is always correct and we have noted no instances of mispronunciations due to word-stress shifts, even in the case of such frequently misstressed items in Polish English as *pa'trol, 'suffocating, up'stairs*.

To sum up, Jessica Chastain's alleged Polish accent is devoid of the majority of typical features of this variety of English. As a matter of fact, her phonetic departures from native English are rare and inconsistent. They concern mostly the actress's irregular attempts to produce a trilled rhotic, some cases of replaced interdentals and isolated vowel substitutions. In brief, her speech cannot be considered a successful and convincing imitation of a Polish-English accent.

5. Comparison of the two accents

The table below summarizes the major properties of the accents used by the two actresses in the films under analysis.

Feature	Zofia's accent	Antonina's accent
spelling pronunciation	no cases of spelling pronunciation, many difficult words pronounced correctly	a few spelling-based distortions of the vowel in *comes, enough,* many difficult words pronounced correctly
consonants:		
interdentals	fairly consistent replacement of the interdentals with [t, d]	the interdentals generally preserved, occasional substitutions with plosives
rhotic	the rhotic often pronounced as a trill, mostly in consonant clusters	the rhotic inconsistently pronounced as a trill or an approximant
velar nasal	often pronounced with the following velar plosive, e.g. in *long, feeling*	pronounced without the following velar plosive, e.g. in *long, nothing*
obstruent devoicing	many cases of devoicing	a few cases of devoicing
non-Polish properties	the use of dark 'l', syllabic consonants, palatoalveolars, frequent palatalization of velars	the use of dark 'l', aspiration, syllabic consonants, palatoalveolars

Table 1. Comparison of Zofia's and Antonina's Polish accent features. *To be continued*

Feature	Zofia's accent	Antonina's accent
vowels:		
length	variable	native English
quality	vowel contrasts preserved, occasional attempts at Polish-like vowels	all vowel contrasts preserved, a few attempts to change English vowels
/ɪ/	a few cases of E [ɪ] > P [i]	English [ɪ] preserved
vowel reduction	a few cases of vowel reduction	no vowel reduction
word stress	one error (*rea'lize*)	no stress errors

Table 1. Comparison of Zofia's and Antonina's Polish accent features. *Continued*

The comparison of Zofia's and Antonina's pronunciation in the two films presented in Table 1 shows that Meryl Streep has imitated more features of a typical Polish English accent than Jessica Chastain. This effect is strongly reinforced by numerous grammatical mistakes Zofia makes in her English juxtaposed with Antonina's grammatically flawless speech. Both actresses, however, are not consistent in their polonized pronunciation and use many features which are either absent or very rare in Polish English.

In view of the above analysis, it seems that the two actresses have chosen different approaches to presenting Polish-accented English; while Meryl Streep appears to have aimed at as close approximation to it as possible, Jessica Chastain generally preserved American English pronunciation, occasionally departing from it and using Polish-like sounds to remind the audience that Antonina was Polish, but without a serious attempt at accuracy and consistency. Whether intended or not, these differences might be due to different strategies employed in accent coaching the two actresses received, their talent for oral mimicry, the amount of time devoted to accent training or a combination of these factors. It is interesting to find out how successful these two approaches to Polish-English are with regard to the listeners' perception of the two accents, which our study focuses on.

6. A perception study

The final step in our procedure was a perception study whose goal was to find out how many native speakers of Polish and English could identify Zofia's and Antonina's nationality correctly. In other words, the question was whether their accents sounded credible to 100 listeners, including 66 Polish students and 34 native speakers of English.

For the purposes of our study four speech samples were employed, including two produced by Meryl Streep and Jessica Chastain in the films under analysis.[27] The remaining ones were provided by two young Polish women: one speaking English with a medium degree of a Polish accent, the other with a heavy accent.[28] All the samples were about two minutes long and were presented to the listeners in a random order. They were all short narratives which, in the case of passages read by the Polish participants, were written by the authors in such a way as to include items representing contexts in which typical Polish English pronunciation problems listed in Section 2 are likely to occur. The samples of Zofia's and Antonina's speech were also short narratives.

The first group of listeners consisted of 66 Polish students of English, of both sexes, aged 20–21, representing an upper intermediate to advanced level of English proficiency, who have studied English phonetics and are very familiar with Polish-accented English (which they themselves use).[29] The second group of listeners included 34 native speakers of English (17 British and 17 American), all living outside Poland, of both sexes, with a college education and practicing different professions (e.g. real estate agents, journalists, teachers), aged 20–55, whose familiarity with Polish English can be described as fairly limited.[30] All the participants listened to each sample twice and were asked to identify the speakers' nationality. In the case of Polish students the listening procedure was carried out during their classes at the university. Native English listeners assessed the samples, sent to them electronically, individually.

Let us present the obtained results, beginning with the Polish listeners.

Zofia

As shown in Figure 1, Zofia was identified as Russian by 60.6%, as Polish by 30.3%, as Ukrainian by 3% of the Polish listeners. She was considered Spanish, German or

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[27] It should be added that appropriate samples were not easy to find. Many of Zofia's speeches could not be used because they contained some information which could indicate her identity. In Antonina's case the difficulty was a general lack of her longer utterances in the film.

[28] The speaker with a heavy Polish accent employed all the features listed in Section 2, while the speaker with a medium degree of Polish accent employed more English-like sounds, made no stress errors and local errors.

[29] The selection of this group of listeners was motivated by the fact that our intention in this study, apart from obtaining speakers' nationality identification judgements, was to receive the participants' comments concerning phonetic features which allowed them to make their decisions. Polish students of English were thus well-qualified to provide informed comments. For reasons of space, this part of our research cannot be presented here. Suffice it to say that the majority of the features they provided are listed in Section 2, with the rhotic pronunciation and mispronounced interdentals mentioned most frequently as indicators of a Polish accent. As to the comments supplied by the listeners who were native speakers of English, they were all impressionistic and vague in nature, e.g. "Her voice sounds throaty" or "Her sounds are strange". As observed by Walshe (2009), listeners with no training in phonetics are, as a rule, unable to identify (and name, of course) those features which are responsible for the impression of a foreign accent.

[30] They may thus be regarded as a potential audience of films such as the ones analyzed in this paper.

Italian by individual participants. 1.5% of the students could not specify the speaker's nationality at all. The high percentage of Polish listeners identifying Zofia's accent as Russian can be attributed to her Russsian-like and un-Polish palatalization of velars before front vowels. As a matter of fact, this feature was provided by the participants as responsible for judging Zofia to be Russian. It should be noted that as many as 94% of the Polish listeners regarded Zofia to be of some Slavic origin.
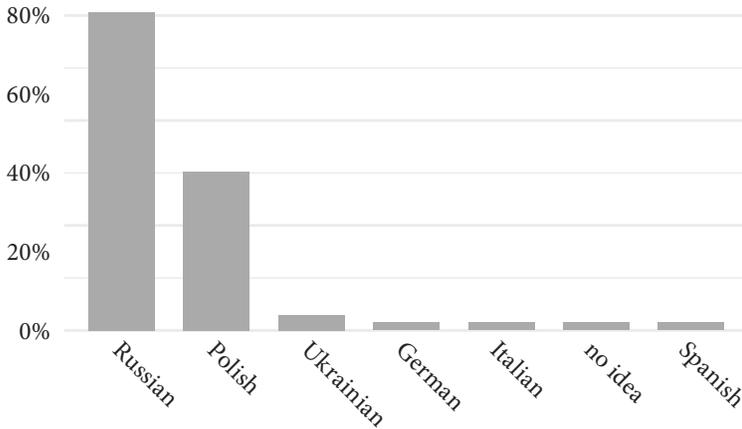
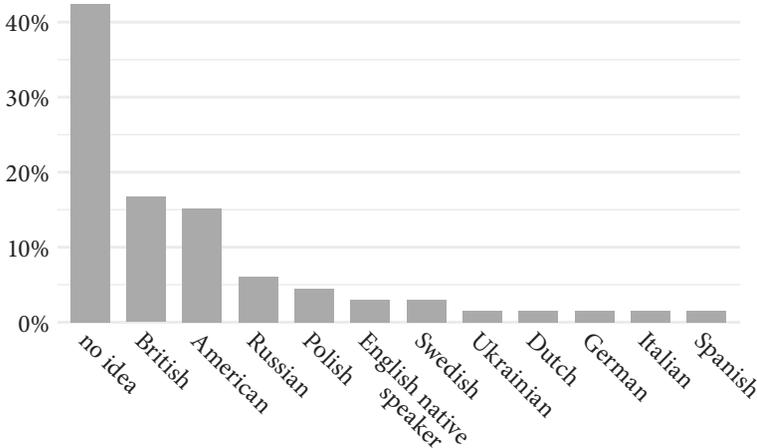Figure 1. Polish listeners' identifications of Zofia's nationality

Antonina

Figure 2. Polish listeners' identifications of Antonina's nationality

Figure 2 shows that 42.4% of the Polish listeners were unable to identify Antonina's nationality, 16.7% thought she was British, 15.2% considered her American, 6.1% Russian

and only 4.5% Polish. Some participants viewed her as Spanish, German, Italian or Dutch (1.5% each). Thus, the majority of listeners considered Antonina to be either a native English speaker (British, American or simply an "English native speaker" without specifying the nationality) (33.5%) or could not make any identification (42.4%). For about 10% she sounded Slavic.

The listeners had no problems identifying two genuine English-speaking Poles; this was done successfully by 98.5% in the case of the speaker with a stronger accent and by 86.4% in the case of the speaker with a weaker accent. These results are in sharp contrast with the actresses' results.

The perception study with native speakers of English yielded the following interesting, but different results for the simulated accents.
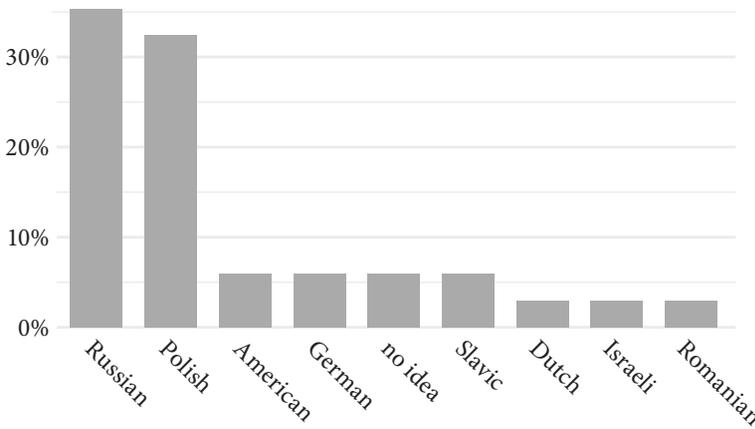
Zofia

Figure 3. English native speakers' identifications of Zofia's nationality

Zofia was thought to be Russian by 35.3%, Polish by 32.4% and undefined Slavic by 7.7% by native speakers of English, which means 70% of identifications were as a person of Slavic origin. According to individual listeners she was German, Dutch, Israeli or Romanian.

Antonina

Antonina's pronunciation sounded Polish to 29.4%, Russian to 17.6% of native English listeners and 8.8% of them could not identify her accent. Individual speakers considered her German, Irish, Croatian, Czech, Lithuanian, Turkish, Albanian or Middle Eastern. The rates of correct identifications of genuine Polish-English speakers were 82.5% in the case of a woman with a heavy accent and 53% for the one with a mild accent.

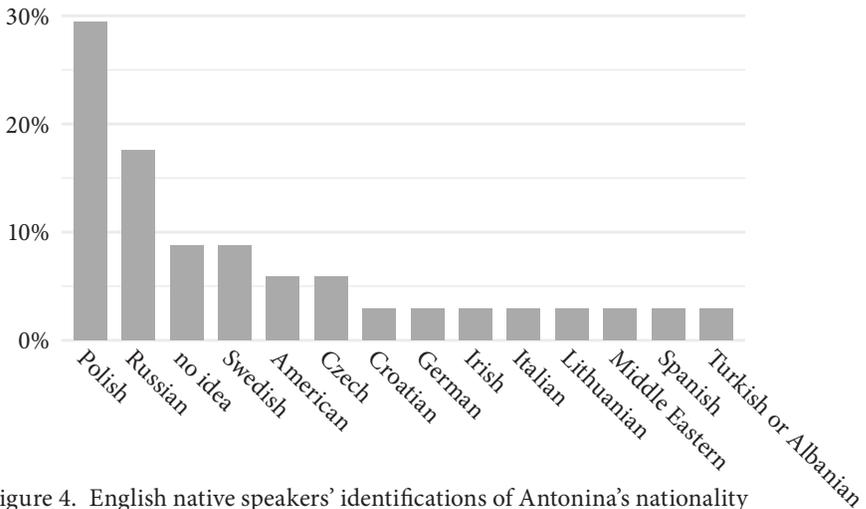The results of the perception study are summarized in Table 2.

Figure 4. English native speakers' identifications of Antonina's nationality

Identified as Polish	Zofia	Antonina	Polish speaker 1 (heavy accent)	Polish speaker 2 (mild accent)
by Polish listeners	30.3%	4.5%	98.5%	86.5%
by English listeners	32.4%	29.4%	82.5%	53%

Table 2. The results of the perception study

As shown in Table 2, both actresses failed to convince the majority of Polish listeners that they were Polish, but Meryl Streep was far more successful in this respect (30.3%) than Jessica Chastain (4.5%). Interestingly, however, according to a similar number of English native speakers Zofia (32.4%) and Antonina (29.4%) sound Polish.[31] This means that in spite of criticism of Jessica Chastain's accent, it is credible to a similar number of native English, but not Polish, listeners, as Meryl Streep's pronunciation. The figures concerning the correct identifications of genuine Polish speakers in both instances are significantly higher, particularly for Polish participants due to their greater familiarity with Polish-English accents.

It is also worth adding that both actresses sounded Slavic to many listeners. Thus, Zofia was regarded to be of some Slavic origin by 94% of the Polish participants and 70% of native English listeners. The corresponding figures for Antonina are 10% and 70% respectively. These results might indicate that English native speakers have a stereotypical generalized view of what Slavic-accented English sounds like.

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[31] An interesting issue concerns a comparison of British and American participants' judgements. Both Zofia and Antonina sounded Polish to more Americans than to the British, and were considered Russian by more British than American subjects, which is surprising in view of a million Polish immigrants in the British Isles and a frequent exposure of the British citizens to Polish-accented English.

7. Conclusion

An examination of Zofia's and Antonina's pronunciation in *Sophie's Choice* and *The Zookeeper's Wife* shows that Meryl Streep was more accurate than Jessica Chastain in reproducing the most typical features of Polish-accented speech, which supports film critics' impressionistic opinions presented in Section 1. This conclusion finds further confirmation in the results of the perception study with Polish listeners in which Zofia's accent turned out to be more credible than Antonina's speech. We have also demonstrated that there is little justification in the claims concerning Meryl Streep's allegedly impeccable pronunciation.

Nevertheless, to more or less the same number of native English listeners both accents sound Polish (Zofia – 31%, Antonina 29%) or Slavic (70% in both cases). These results stand in sharp contrast with authentic samples of Polish English pronunciation correctly identified by over 90% of the Polish listeners and 67% of the English listeners.

The presented analysis of the two simulated Polish accents in *Sophie's Choice* and *The Zookeeper's Wife* does not allow us to draw more general conclusions concerning a broader and interesting issue of American filmmakers' policy with respect to Polish accent imitations in the movies, but allows us to claim that they are concerned primarily with native English audiences' perception of pseudo-foreign accents rather than with their accuracy. Further detailed studies of Polish-accented English in American films are needed to allow for formulating more generalizations concerning this issue. Needless to say, the presented perception study employed a limited number of participants. It is therefore possible that a larger or different group of listeners would provide other results.

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[32] In the case of Internet sources frequently many bibliographic details (e.g. authors' names, page numbers) were unavailable.

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