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Invasion: Legitimate Language and the Coming of Sound in the *Nottingham*

***Evening Post*, 1928-1930**

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Configuring world events to create meaning for local communities is a major function of the local press. News coverage as featured in provincial papers like the *Nottingham Evening Post* (NEP) feature a broad range of stories, ranging in scope from the local to the global. Residents of English towns received the majority of their news through these papers in the 1920s and '30s. The local mainstream press provided a way for communities to position their own lives within national or international contexts. The provincial press during this period can be divided into two broad categories: small-circulation weekly and large-circulation evening newspapers (of which the *Nottingham Evening Post* is one). In his study of the provincial press, Ian Jackson finds evening newspapers more likely to contain stories of greater national concern.¹ Jackson's study was performed during the 1960s, but this characteristic was evident well before. Jackson quotes press historian James Grant, who in 1871 wrote of the growing influence of provincial papers "in relation to questions of national interest and importance."² Grant wrote further, "Our existing provincial journals exercise a mighty power over the public mind in the various localities in which they are published."

¹ Jackson, *The Provincial Press and the Community*, 273.

² Grant, *The Newspaper Press*, 158; Quoted in Jackson, *The Provincial Press and the Community*, 11–14.

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The widespread transition to sound cinema began in the United States in 1927, but did not spread to London until 1928. Talkies didn't reach Nottingham until June 1929, when the musical *Lucky Boy* played at the Nottingham Elite. Yet in the press, articles about the rise of sound film were disseminated throughout the country from an early stage. As Mark Jancovich and Lucy Faire write, “The first talkie [in Nottingham] was not a surprise sensation, but rather the final, long-awaited arrival of a much-talked-about phenomenon.”³

During this period, reporting shifted from technological matters to an emphasis on cultural implications. It is my view that a nationalist narrative informed the early reporting of sound cinema. I will explore this idea in two ways. First, I will explore the nationalist rhetoric of the mainstream press, with regards to reporting on the talkies. Secondly, I will focus on the question of language, using Bourdieu’s framework of linguistic economics as a mode of understanding, and touching upon issues of class and social power. The Nottingham Evening Post serves to illustrate broader tendencies within the British provincial press.

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³ Jancovich and Faire, *The Place of the Audience*, 92.

Contemporary theories about the role of the press in the early twentieth century tended to revolve around two separate patterns of thought. On one hand, the media as having an educative public mandate. On the other, the media purely as a commodity for consumption. It is apparent that these two ideas, whilst seemingly oppositional, are working in concert. The idealised educative press, to assert its dominance within the marketplace, must recognise its status as a commodity. To this end, newspapers shifted from a concern with educating their readers to representing them instead. A role that, as Stuart Hall writes, “is never a passive, educative one.”⁴

In her study on national newspaper reportage during the First World War, Claudia Heske writes “national identities are shaped in part by the publication practices of periodicals.”⁵ Here she is drawing on Benedict Anderson’s notion of the printed word as a way to construct communal meaning.⁶ In the case of the wartime press, the conflation of national identity with nation-state interest is a key result of this. Edwardian-era journalists’ professional reputation for “objectivity” is paradoxical. The ideology of “objectivity” demands a distance between the reportage and the subject, in order to serve as a representative for the reader. Yet the newspapers also operate within structures that need particular political and economic frameworks. They have incentive to reinforce “official” truth.⁷

⁴ Hall, ‘Newspapers, Parties and Classes’, 32–33; Cited in Heske, ‘The Ideology of Objectivity’, 5.

⁵ Heske, ‘The Ideology of Objectivity’, 3.

⁶ See Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

⁷ Heske, ‘The Ideology of Objectivity’, 11.

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Heske finds within the text of articles from *The Times* that “a rhetoric that uses possessive pronouns is predominant [which works] to situate the reader in the position of an unnamed man for which the battle is being fought.”⁸ Identification and meaning is created in tandem with nationalist communality. The alignment of the mainstream press to the political fortunes of the nation aligns its modes of representation to nationalist ideas of community. Possessive pronouns are part of a rhetorical code called the New Journalism. It frames subjective discourse as incontestable representations of objective truth.⁹

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In the middle of the nineteenth century, a series of law repeals heralded an era of great expansion in the provincial press. As newspapers grew, competition increased. The ability for newspapers to speak directly to the political leanings of its readers was curtailed. It would be impossible to sustain widespread readership without courting readers with other socio-political persuasions. (AAA¹⁰) The local press becomes a forum for all points of view. It is ostensibly a true marketplace of ideas, and ostensibly a balanced one. The local press serves as a bridge between provincial communities and major centres of power. The telegraph made it possible for news from London to reach the provinces faster than London newspapers.¹¹ This gave the provincial press an advantage and allowed it to shape the narrative for its local

⁸ Ibid., 9.

⁹ Heske, ‘Inconsumable Realities’, 6.

¹⁰ Lee, ‘The Structure, Ownership and Control of the Press, 1855-1914’, 128.

¹¹ Ibid., 119.

audience. In the process, it acquired several functions within the communities it served, including the mandate to foster community identity. This identity is defined locally, rather than nationally, except for matters that could only be understood nationally, such as the First World War, or the coming of sound cinema.

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On August 25th, 1928, an article was published in the *NEP* headlined “Yankee ‘Talkies’. New Language Peril Threatened. Safeguarding English Ears.”¹² (Article A). The article is an example of a trend in the British coverage of the rise of the talkies in America: concerns and criticisms based on the perceived unattractiveness of American voices. The apparent crisis asks “whether we are to permit the wholesale introduction of American accents and American idioms into our most popular places of entertainment.” Here, as with the articles discussed by Heske, is the use of possessive pronouns, seen throughout the text. It positions American speech outside of the British experience of the English language. It also relays fears of the youth’s assimilation of Americanisms into their own speech. The article explicitly ties language to national identity: “The alarm felt by all educationists – and indeed all who love England and the English language.” The implication thus made is that language as the English speak it is the only true form of English there is. Or, to use the Bourdieusian term, it is the only legitimate language.

¹² *NEP*, 25th August 1928.

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Tim Machan discusses the primacy of language in the construction of national identity. He writes “unless they somehow occurred for entirely internal reasons, even language shift [...] can easily be seen to challenge the cultural and political integrity of a people and their view of themselves.”¹³ Since the industrialisation of the press and the increase in literacy and global communication, the regulation of language has increasingly entered the realm of institutional control.¹⁴ The influx of American speech undermined efforts to maintain an idealised norm of English. Internal variations of speech and dialect within Britain are not problematized in these narratives. It could perhaps be argued that it is the externality of the American talkie that represented the true threat. It could also be argued that the strength of the American ‘threat’ compared to internal ones was far greater.

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In January 1929, the Post ran an article headlined “‘Talkie’ Film Problem. ‘American’ Understood Only In England.”¹⁵ (Article B), which marks American English as different to British English (or English English) and ties it to the national identity of American films. The article explains that American speech is only intelligible abroad to English audiences, citing this as a reason for concern for American film exports. At no point does the article refer to the American language as “English.” This is a feature that recurs frequently throughout the newspaper’s coverage of the talkies.

¹³ Machan, *Language Anxiety*, 170.

¹⁴ Machan, *Language Anxiety*; Shabad and Gunther, ‘Language, Nationalism, and Political Conflict in Spain’.

¹⁵ *NEP*, 12th January 1929.

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On the 19th of December 1929, the Post ran a pair of articles side-by-side.¹⁶ These help to illustrate some of the more local happenings within the city regarding the coming of sound (see Article C). The first is headlined “British Talkie Triumph. ‘Atlantic’ Trade Shown In Nottingham” and regards the successful trade screening of E. A. Dupont’s *Atlantic* at the New Empress Cinema in Nottingham. This was a film notable for having been produced simultaneously in German as well as English, a fact not mentioned within the article. The second article is headlined “Nottm. Cinema To Close. ‘Yet Another Outcome Of The Talkie Menace’” and relates the announcement at a meeting of the Notts and Derby Cinematograph Exhibitors’ Association (CEA) that Nottingham’s Long-row Picture House, operational since 1912, will close due to competition from the talkies. The closure is not precisely blamed on American talkies, rather than sound cinema in general. However, it is worth noting that in both articles there is a distinct narrative of menace. In the case of the *Atlantic* screening, it is a menace overcome: the article writes, “Since the advent of the ‘talkie’ boom from America [...] certainly we have been steadily accustoming our ears to receiving English, through the medium of the talking film, as she ought not to be spoken.” Yet it then proceeds to dub *Atlantic* a triumph in the face of this onslaught, one that “should do much to revive the flagging fortunes of the British industry.” Sound cinema is still being explicitly labelled as an American phenomenon. It is also one that has compounded the downturn in the British film industry. The story of the Long-row closure is forthright about the menace of sound cinema.

¹⁶ *NEP*, 19th December 1929.

The rhetoric of the article positions the cinema as a victim of unjust circumstances. Joseph Pollard, the CEA delegate, regards talkies as a novelty whose popularity would pass.

The closure of the Long-row due to this fad is framed as collateral damage, rather than the result of business as usual. Even whilst lamenting the loss of the Long-row, Pollard maintains, “it would be wise for exhibitors not to be stampeded into wiring their houses at great expense.” The CEA throughout the transition period was openly hostile to the coming of sound. In their 1930 annual report, they described it as an “invasion”.¹⁷ The CEA’s concerns about American films stem from more economic factors than the strident nationalism of the press. Yet it is telling that both institutions use the rhetoric of invasion and menace to rationalise the contemporary moment in the film industry. Similarly, both institutions set aside blanket critique of the talkies when referring to British successes. They are instead labelled as “triumphs,” and frequently heralded as saviours.¹⁸

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The success of British films abroad was met with similar fanfare. On the 22nd of January 1930, the Post ran a small segment claiming “British films are much more popular in the United States than ever British silent films were.”¹⁹ The reason given by American actress

¹⁷ Cinematograph Exhibitors’ Association, *Annual Report for Year Ending December 31st, 1930*, 6.

¹⁸ The announcement of *Blackmail*’s arrival at the Berridge-road Picture House included the claim ‘It is noteworthy for the fact that it presents the English language as it should be. In this manner it is superior to anything that America has yet accomplished.’ (*NEP*, 10th December 1929). See also Glancy, *Hollywood and the Americanization of Britain*, 93–96.

¹⁹ *NEP*, 22nd January 1930.

Jacqueline Logan was that American audiences are “tickled to death by the pure English that is spoken. America is, in fact, beginning to learn real English. Your talking films have, therefore, a definite educational value.” The cultural exchange effected by the sound cinema is framed as being a zero-sum game. One English-speaking culture must conquer the other. On the 4th of February that year, Parliament discussed the matter of limiting the importation of American talkies to Britain. The Post printed several remarks by notable figures within the British film industry. Statements by Benita Hume and Jameson Thomas consider the best response to be a countervailing influence on America by exporting more high-quality British films. Kathleen O’Regan predicts “America will become Anglicised as much as we will become Americanised.”²⁰ Concerns for the integrity of the language are entwined with concerns for the health of the British film industry. Economic measures are frequently cited as the surest way to offset the American invasion. This is either from a protectionist film importation protocol or through direct stimulus to the production industry. Yet public opinion is also directly marshalled by the press through nationalist rhetoric.

²⁰ *NEP*, 4th February 1930.

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“English as she ought to be spoke”: Legitimate Language

Pierre Bourdieu sets up a useful linguistic framework to explore the conflicts presented by newspaper articles such as this. He writes:

“...A sociological critique subjects the concepts of linguistics to a threefold displacement. In place of grammaticalness it puts the notion of acceptability, or, to put it another way, in place of ‘the’ language (langue), the notion of the legitimate language. In place of relations of communication (or symbolic interaction) it puts relations of symbolic power, and so replaces the question of the meaning of speech with the question of the value and power of speech. Lastly, in place of specifically linguistic competence, it puts symbolic capital, which is inseparable from the speaker’s position in the social structure.”²¹

He also writes, “competence implies the power to impose reception.”²²

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This account of linguistic economics helps to explain two key features of the rhetoric of the press. Firstly, on a structural level, the newspaper is a public, widely circulated forum. As such, it imposes some level of reception that goes beyond the means of the average member of the public. It becomes a model of authorised, official language. Secondly, stories about the corrupting effect of American speech are founded on this notion of legitimate language.

²¹ Bourdieu, ‘The Economics of Linguistic Exchanges’, 646.

²² Ibid., 648.

British English is coded as being the legitimate form of English. However, the influence of American media has challenged its dominant position. Recognising that the cinema is a marketplace, the 25th August 1929 article goes on to advocate for “keeping the talking pictures in this country confined as far as possible, to British manufacturers, British players, and British speakers.” The ability for American films to command a larger audience depends on being booked in larger numbers than British films. British domination of domestic screens would serve to limit general exposure to American speech. It would also serve as a delegitimising tactic, as the de facto position would be a privileging of British English. As it is, American talkies are (or would be) the dominant forms of discourse uttered the cinema.

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The corruption of the language stems from the ostensible overriding importance of the symbolic power of American films in the minds of the affected youth. Because of the compelling legitimacy created by the imposition of reception, the legitimacy of the language is assumed. As Simon Susen writes, “Legitimate forms of language are sustained through the exercise of legitimate authority.”²³ The weakness of British talkies in the marketplace undermines their linguistic legitimacy. The newspaper, from its symbolically powerful position as an exemplar of acceptable language, is thus mobilised against the American talkie. The legitimacies of the two forms of discourse are weighed in capital and ‘authority’, rather than grammaticalness.

²³ Susen, ‘Bourdiesian Reflections on Language’, 210.

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The effect of this displacement of symbolic power on young audiences corresponds to already apparent performative appreciations. This was both with respect to the use of language – “The printed sub-titles of the silent film have already taught the youth of Britain to bestrew its speed [sic] with the racy phrases of the Bowery and the ranch” – and in other ways. Annette Kuhn relates the memories of young female cinemagoers of the 1930s. She writes that many of them “suggest a gender-specific relationship with cinema culture as a site of identifications or a template for imitations.”²⁴ Language serves as another way to access that sense of belonging to and identifying with the world of film stars and Hollywood. American speech is legitimised by the social power it exerts. As Bourdieu writes, “What speaks is not [...] the language, but the whole social person.”²⁵ Americanised speech, in much the same way as imitated hairstyles or fashion, is an attempt to access and become “the whole social person” (in this case, film stars generally or specific stars). Bereft of social or symbolic power of their own, British youth become purely consumers and users of language. They have no mandate to preserve structural norms. The relative social consequences of imitating American speech are limited, and the potential social gains – through shared identification with peers or the ability to access the world of the stars – are persuasive.

²⁴ Kuhn, *An Everyday Magic*, 110.

²⁵ Bourdieu, ‘The Economics of Linguistic Exchanges’, 653.

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The extent to which nationalist narratives affected the opinions of cinemagoers is hard to know. Still, the press would have been by far the main way for news of the talkies to reach British people before their widespread arrival. Cinema circuit owner Sidney Bernstein conducted a survey of his patrons in 1928-29. He found that only 50% of men and 30% of women welcomed the coming of sound. This was despite their popularity in America and the fact that, as Bernstein relates, “The questionnaire was taken before ‘talkie’ films were really on the market.”²⁶

This paper has focused on coverage of the early period of the transition, from early recognition that sound was coming to British shores to the arrival of the first talkies. In the years following the start of the British sound era, communal identity soon began to draw itself along regional and class lines, rather than just national ones. The rise of stars like Gracie Fields and George Formby heralded a new appreciation for local difference within Britain. It also highlighted the commercial viability of these markets. The question of how linguistic economics function within these realms merits further exploration. It would serve to further explore the role of the provincial press in these local spheres.

²⁶ *NEP*, 3rd April 1929.

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