


Portrayal of Selected African Dialects and Accents in *The Woman King*

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the portrayal of selected African dialects and accents in *The Woman King*, a Hollywood film by mainly African actors. Directors, dialect, and accent coaches view these tools as vital in the overall development of screen productions in an educative and informative manner, harmonizing the character's cultural, emotional, physiological, and psychological as they align with dialogue, identity, language, and idiolect. The study purposively selected actors in *The Woman King* through a content analysis lens. The data was collected through a qualitative and quantitative research method, including published interviews, audience member observations, and documentation analysis for data collection. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, guided by key concepts such as dialect and accent in character portrayal, cultural representation, and audience perception. The findings revealed that dialect and accent are potent tools for authenticity, cultural representation, and audience engagement. In the movie, dialect and accent take away from the depth and complexity of characters, create a realistic setting, challenge stereotypes, and empower marginalized communities. The content analyzed and audience response highlight the consistency and inconsistency of dialect and accent, appreciating their contributions to the immersive, embodied, and emotional experience as professional actors. The study concluded that language, dialect, and accent must play significant roles in film productions with specificity and without stereotypes, enhancing their artistic quality and representation as long as the casts, dialect, and accent coaches. The director can achieve believability and intelligibility in the target accents of the specific production.

Keywords: *Language; Dialect; Accent in Films; The Woman King Movie; Character Portrayal in Film.*

Introduction

Language has been a fundamental part of human evolution over the centuries and eras. It has also evolved and has become vital to understanding our cultural identities as humans. Over six thousand languages are used by humans to communicate (Mellyana et al., 2024). These languages have different variations across different cultures. Despite the diversity of language,

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it is still crucial to human existence as a means of communication. The typical human being primarily communicates with his/herself, their environment, and whatever God they worship. Language is one of the most polished and sophisticated methods of communication (Gilakjani et al., 2020; Levis & McCrocklin, 2018; Munro, 2018). Language continues to be man's powerful tool for communication. Language is a way for humans to share our thoughts, feelings, and wants using symbols we choose to make. It's not something we are born knowing how to do - we have to learn it laboriously. Language is broad and has many variations (Sapir, 1921); dialect is more specific as it concerns how a particular group of people speak. Humans spread to different parts of the earth; these smaller units had to devise a mode of communication for their groups.

Dialect can be seen as a particular form of language used to represent a specific group of people or a particular region or culture. It is a great and valuable tool used to convey a community's social, cultural, and historical aspects and a key element in character development, setting, and tone. In the past few decades, it has become easier to identify a person's background based on their language. One must recognize a particular language's various regional dialects based on acoustic signals to identify a person's dialect. The ability to adequately tell a speaker's dialect has become important not just for speech recognition alone (Biadsy, 2011). It will allow us to analyze the speaker's speech and deduce the speaker's regional origin and ethnicity. It should also prove useful in other systems. For instance, it could also prove highly beneficial in forensic speaker profiling.

Dialect and accent are often interchangeable despite slight differences in their meanings. According to accent, it has to do primarily with how certain people pronounce certain words by the tone of their voice, pronunciation of vowels, consonants, prosody, and stress (Aeni et al. 2021), which hints at their social status and region. The accent is the most apparent distinction between the two dialects. Dialects are variants of a language specific to certain geographical locations or classes of people (Li et al., 2017) become more accessible to narrow down their roots and how or where they grew up.

Despite the production of films globally and especially in Nigeria (Nollywood), there is still the need for dialect and accent portrayal in films mainly utilized to depict culture and inclusivity. The specific implementation of dialect and accent is becoming increasingly significant in films and stage performances worldwide. Film industries like Hollywood

(Bleichenbacher 2008; Coronel et al. 2020; Holsen 2024), British industry (Zabalbeascoa 2021), Chinese industry, YouTube (Juma 2021), and even Nollywood (Adedun 2010; Abodunrin and Akinola 2019; Oladipupo and Akinfenwa 2023) have started putting considerable thought into implementation of accent. In the world of theatre, dialect is given great importance and is constantly used in theatre productions in Broadway, off-Broadway, off-off-Broadway and also in Nigerian stage productions. Dialect is used because of its impact on artistic representation (Sanjadireja (2020) - it adds believability to a story. Dialect and accent are used in theatre and film to create a sense of authenticity and realism and to help actors bring their characters to life. When actors embody and articulate a dialect or accent with the assistance of a speech/dialogue/accent/dialect coach, they are able to be in the audience during the performance without misconceptions or misinformation. The improper use of this artistry in performance always discredits the overall performance onstage or onscreen. In a nutshell, authenticity and intelligibility are the goals of any performance space.

Vocal authenticity and intelligibility are aspects of any dialect and accent utilized onstage and onscreen performance. Towards the success of any stage or film production, research is carried out on the culture, community, language, dialect, and mainly the accent employed. The history of a culture and the manner in which they speak is vital for the overall performance. Achieving this will demand thorough training for the actors and clarity from the speech/accent coach's director on what is being demanded. Therefore, appropriate dialect and accent are effective for the audience's enjoyment. This paper investigates the effect of dialect and accent in *The Woman King*, which was written by Dana Stevens and directed by Gina Prince-Bythewood.

Dialect and accent are becoming areas of focus in film productions (Rittmayer 2009) regardless of the culture in which they are situated since scriptwriters showcase underrepresented cultures, and many films are in diverse cultures. They play a pivotal role in character portrayal, setting, and the production's overall tone. Moreover, dialect is utilized to convey a community's social, cultural, and historical aspects. As such, it is a critical element that adds depth and richness to a performance. Therefore, examining how dialect affects stage and film productions is essential.

Yao (2013) tried to answer the question, "Why have dialects become so popular in films?". Yao (2013) also provides reasons for the recent popularity of dialect in films. Yao (2013) relates this to the functions of dialect in film and drama, which he lists as "serving as fun maker,

indicating the identity of the speaker, and helping to describe the speaker's characteristics.” (Yao: 2013, 11). Several filmmakers and Theatre producers implement dialect in their art because of the functions it serves in individual productions.

Objectives

To examine the use of dialect and accent in character portrayal, analyze the influence on representation and misrepresentation, and explore the cultural representation achieved through the use of dialect and accent for audience perception and reception in *The Woman King*.

Accent and Dialect As Multifaceted Linguistic Phenomena

Dialect: A Multifaceted Linguistic Phenomenon

Dialect and accent are linguistic phenomena that constitute the variations in vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, and sentence structure occurring within the language. Such a construct reflects the unique speech patterns and linguistic norms associated with specific communities or regions. Dialects and accents are created by social, cultural, and geographical factors and represent the rich diversity of human language.

In stage and film productions, one of the critical issues is how to create authenticity and impart further involvement to the audience. The use of dialect and accent ensures the linguistic representation is accurate, immersing the audience in the characters' world and thus providing an enhanced understanding of their culture and social backdrops. Dialect and accent capture the distinct identity of a character or community, thereby contributing to their depth and magnanimity and making them appropriately relatable to the audience.

Dialect and accent can also signify upward or downward social class, education level, age, and background while conforming to another cultural dialect captured during writing, greatly enriching the character portrayal and making them more noticeable in the scenario. For example, if a character speaks with a regional accent and attempts to draw attention to his rural upbringing, he would imply some affected manner of speaking and displeasing to an audience of the specific region. Suppose, instead, an actor played the role with a more standardised accent. In that case, one might appportion him with urban or higher social standing than the one from the village.

On the other hand, if an actor with a more detected accent were to portray roles, she may alternatively represent a city slicker who originated from around 85 million or even less. This means that it becomes apparent that dialect and accent often sufficiently illustrate information about a character's social status, education level, age, and background.

Accent and Dialect for Character Portrayal

In film productions, character portrayal considers social status, cultural background, and dialectal identity for regional representation. When this is well articulated in performance, it can capture the nuances of the linguistic expressions being showcased. As film producers and accent/dialect coaches work together, there is a genuine attempt to convey the character's personality traits, social interactions with other characters in the production, and how the culture influences the performance before the audience for believability.

The use of accents in film productions has always been to help communities tell their stories by themselves, like Africans and Asians, in more convincing and believable ways. It further adds authenticity and kicks against stereotypical accents that may discourage different strands of complexity and misrepresentation of accents in character portrayal. This means that employing or engaging with the right dialect or accent coach, effectively utilizing the appropriate accent on stage and film productions, is bound to create an embodied actor in terms of character and accent portrayal.

Cultural Representation: Celebrating Diversity and Challenging Stereotypical Accents

In film productions, dialect and accent serve as tools for the cultural representation of a character, community, and overall performance. They are to inform the audience with an accurate portrayal of the diverse social experiences and identities of a particular society through the linguistic expressions, social dynamics, and cultural nuances of the performance.

With the incorporation of accents in productions, actors playing specific roles with specific accents adopt a particular variety of a dialect or accent and its cultural heritage. Thus, the accent allows for a better understanding of a particular social context, cultural experience, tradition, or perspectives of a given society through the interaction between characters.

Through the use of dialect and accent in film productions, the socio-cultural challenges in a language are broken, thereby encouraging empathy and the celebration of the richness of

human linguistic diversity. In this regard, including dialect in film production can potentially empower underrepresented communities while promoting language globalization by amplifying historically silenced or overlooked voices.

Methods

In this research, the methodology employed was quantitative and qualitative. The study report was captured through data collection and analysis. The research examines how dialect and accent are used and impact character portrayal, setting the production's overall tone and audience perception. Also, the study examines how dialect and accent convey socio-cultural cum historical spaces of a community and identify the challenges and opportunities in stage and film productions as a multifunctional creative tool. Nevertheless, the research examines the dialectic importance of a language through the accurate representation of speech patterns and linguistic nuances of a particular community or region. As such, dialect and accent establish the socio-cultural context of production while providing insights into a specific community's historical background, traditions, and values through acting.

Results and Discussion

This study revealed that dialect and accent significantly influence character portrayal in stage and film productions. Also, dialect and accent provide actors with valuable tools to shape their characters as they imitate and develop authentic accents, speech patterns, and linguistic styles that accurately represent their backgrounds, identities, and social statuses.

It is important to note that the actor is not a linguist in all sense of it. Her goal through the character and the text is to illuminate the character and tell a story, not to fool the indigenous speakers of the accent (McGuire 2016). The actor might not be able to give a 100% accurate accent. That is okay because the audience knows the actor is not an indigenous speaker. What is important is that the actor is able to portray the character and give a believable performance genuinely. There are different perspectives within the field of dialect, accent, and character portrayal, and debates continue regarding the balance between intelligibility and believability in performance. It is observed that some actors prioritize an authentic representation of the accent over characterization.

Objective 1: To examine the use of dialect and accent in character portrayal in *The Woman King* production.

In this study, the findings reveal that dialect is used to establish authentic and relatable human characters in *The Woman King*. This was possible with the efforts of experienced dialect/accent coaches and directors who meticulously prepared the actors to master the specific dialect/accent associated with the characters' backgrounds and the accents.

Similarly, in *The Woman King*, dialect was instrumental in depicting the cultural authenticity of the Dahomey Kingdom and Oyo Empire. Although a large part of the Nigerian audience found the portrayal of dialect lacking and not quite evocative, it failed to enhance the film's emotional impact. According to Nwajiaku (2022)

There's a Dahomeyan King with a deliberate Nigerian accent and mannerism (Boyega revealed that parts of his acting were "copied and pasted" from his Yoruba father, an Agojie warrior of likely Yoruba origin (Amenza categorically states that she came into Dahomey as a captive, and she also happens to be a worshipper of Ifá) with an accent that's not quite what it should be. These two, I noticed because I am Nigerian. I imagine Beninese nationals will easily point out others. And still, I appreciate the little favour of not having to listen to that generic African lilt that Hollywood thinks every African has. For once, the accents are somewhat easy to ignore and, big picture, don't even feel like much of an issue. (Afrocritik 2022)

The actors' inability to convincingly speak the respective accents of the then Dahomey kingdom and Oyo empire dialects took away from the realism of the characters and their portrayal of the historical events. Overall, the findings indicate that dialect played a significant role in character development, allowing the actors to embody their roles authentically and establish a deeper connection with the audience. The use of dialect added depth and complexity to the characters' identities, contributing to a more immersive theatrical or cinematic experience.

Objective 2: To explore the cultural representation achieved through dialect and accent in *The Woman King*.

Dialect and accent are potent tools with diverse cultural connotations. They are known to capture unique linguistic expressions, traits, and general social complexities. Through dialect, filmmakers and playwrights can provide complex social identities and heritages within varying communities. However, there are criticisms of dialect used in films with similar settings. For

instance, Nelson Mandela's South African dialect used by Idris Elba in *Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom* (2013), the IsiXhosa dialect used by Morgan Freeman in *Invictus* (2009), and Winnie Mandela's South African accent used by Jennifer Hudson in *Winnie Mandela* (2011) were both praised and criticized by critics. Some viewers unfamiliar with the South African accent, especially non-indigenes, may find these actors' interpretations convincing, precise, and genuine. However, many South African viewers see it as contradictory in sounds and musicality of the accent.

The interview and audience findings show how dialect and accent contribute to cultural communities. In *The Woman King*, the African dialects and accents used by the actors sometimes added to the authenticity and richness of the portrayal of the African community they represented. Although it is argued that these dialects and accents were not believable and intelligible in totality, they lack an accurate representation of culture for an empathetic understanding of the characters' experiences.

The study suggests that using dialect in film production contributes to cultural diversity, challenges stereotypes, and provides a platform for marginalized communities to reclaim their narratives. As such, dialect and accent are tools for cultural empowerment and globalization.

Objective 3: To examine the reception and perception of the audience on dialect and accent use in *The Woman King*.

The feedback and findings portray the impact of dialect and accent on the audience's engagement and emotional response, as observed in figures 1-6. In *The Woman King*, the audience feedback showed that some of the actors' accents were not immersive and powerful enough to impact the dialects they portrayed. The audience perception indicated that the dialect and accent used were not as effective as one would have expected from Hollywood stars to create a sense of time and place to contribute to the overall cinematic experience.

The findings also reveal that the audience positively perceived and responded to the dialect and accent used by some of the selected actors in *The Woman King*. The use of accents especially influenced the audience's immersion in the narratives and added to the film's artistic quality. Thus, dialect and accent play vital roles in character portrayal, cultural representation, and audience reception in *The Woman King*.

Nanisca: Perception by Thirty Audience Member

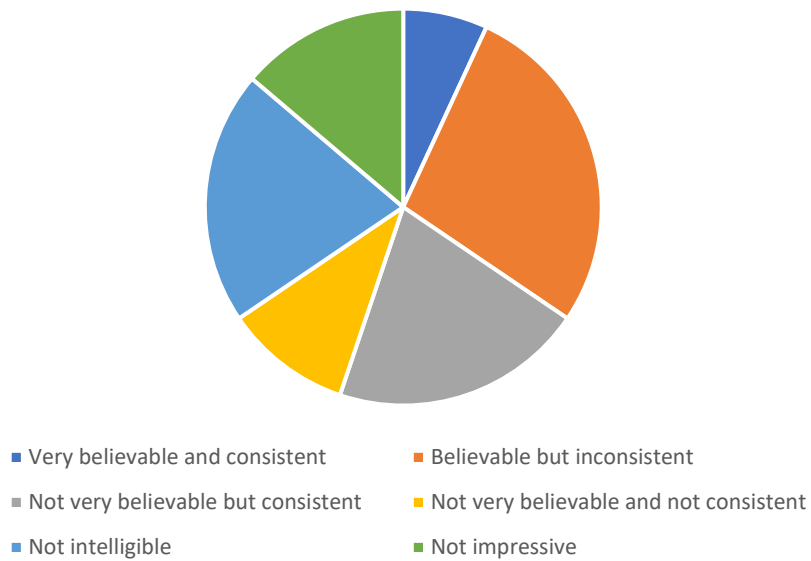


Figure 2

Amenza: Perception by Thirty Audience Member

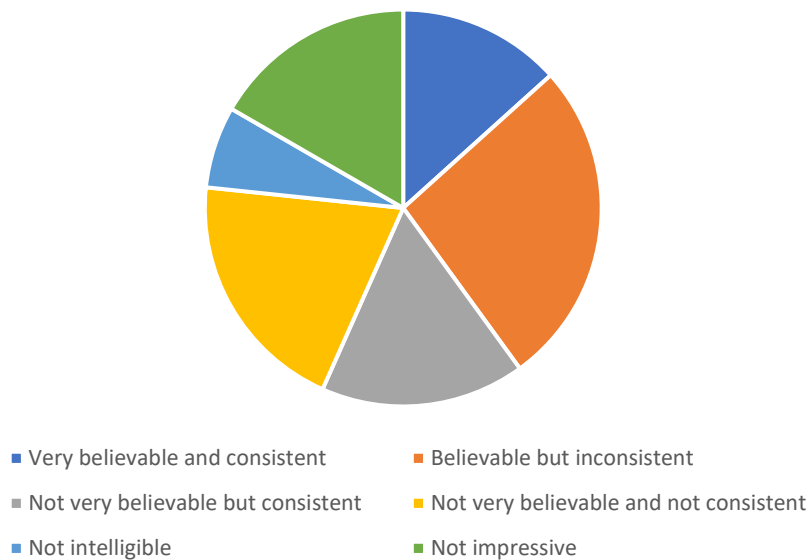


Figure 3

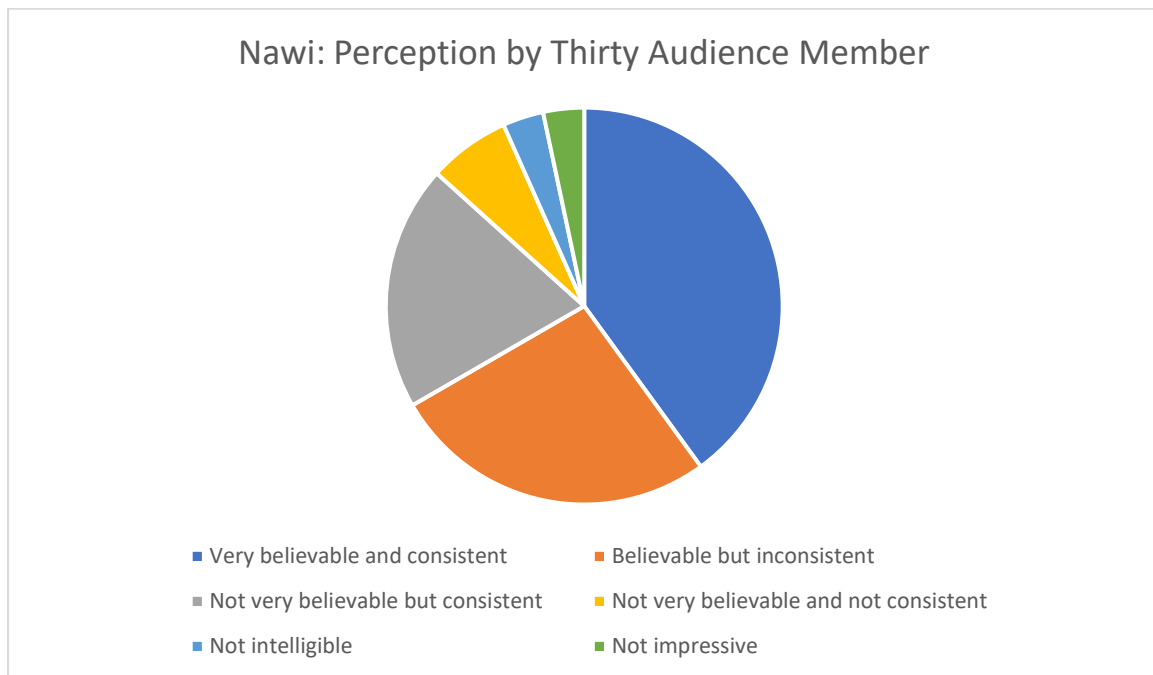


Figure 4

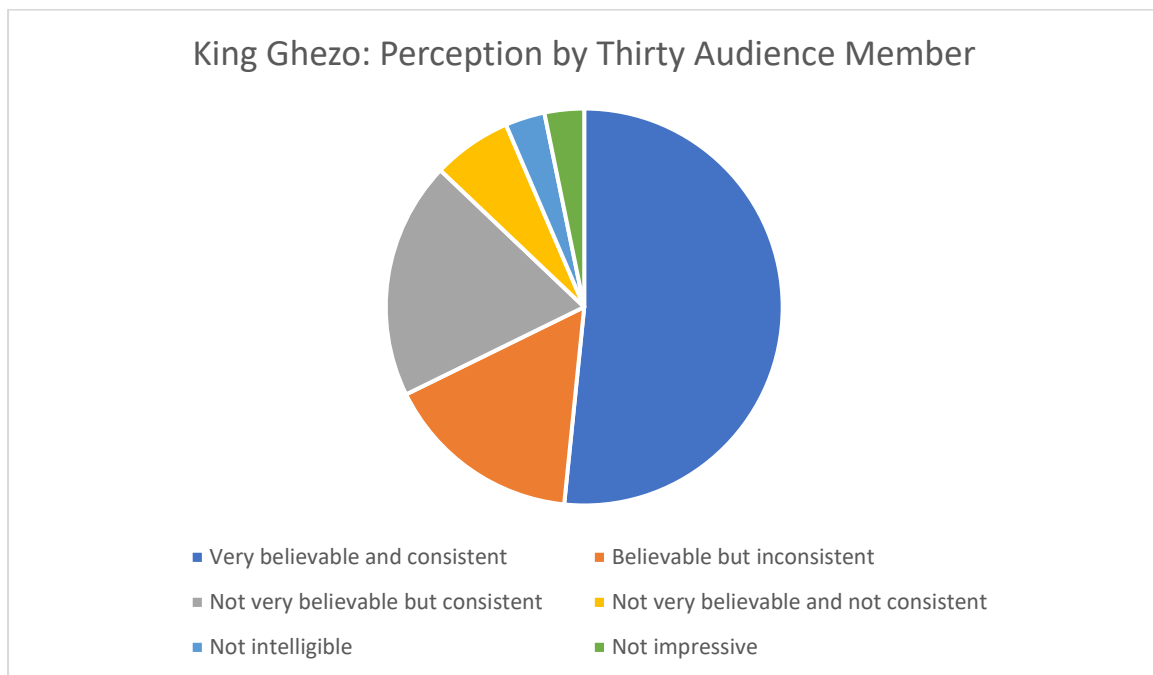


Figure 5

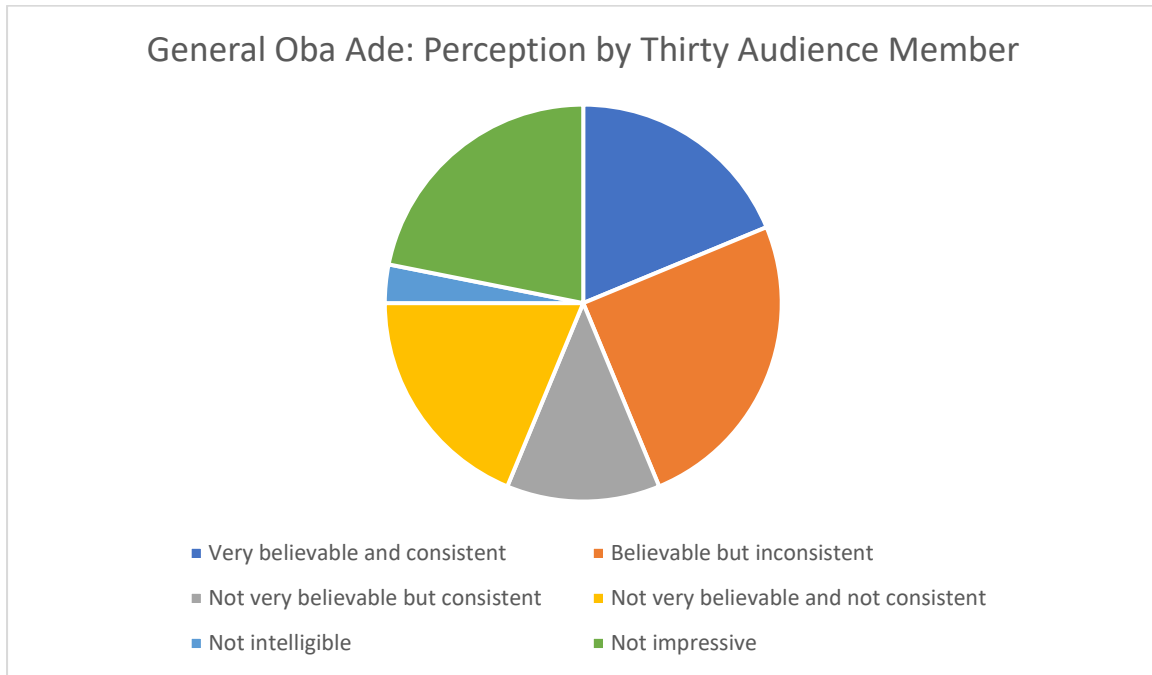
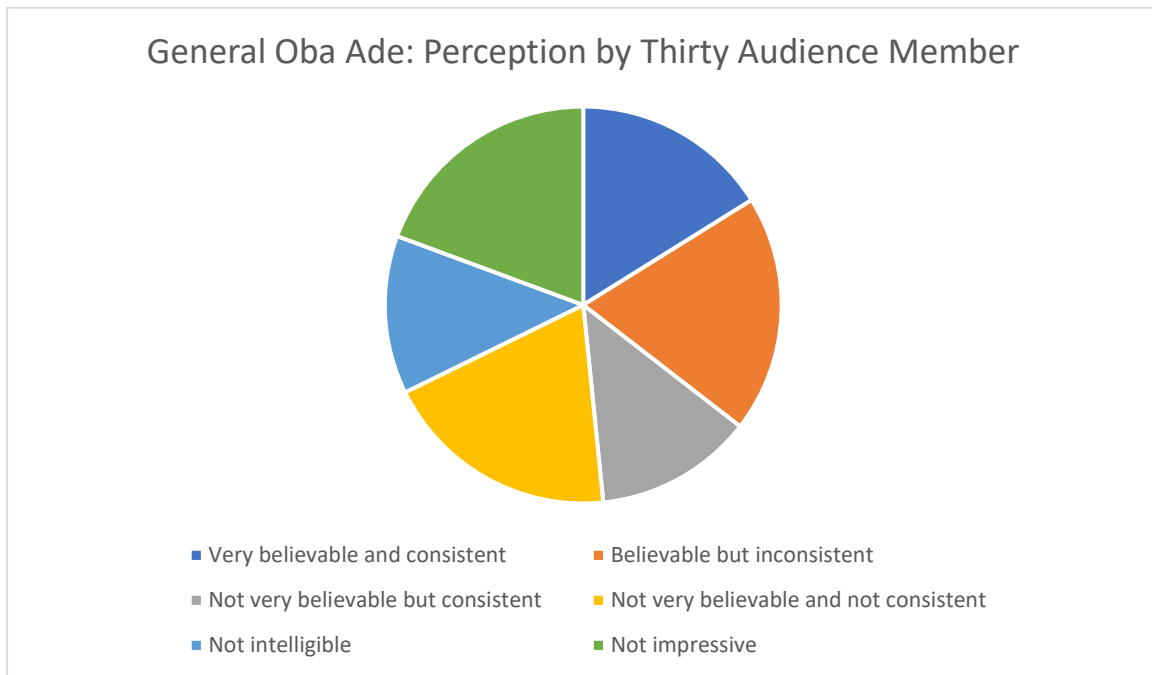


Figure 6



Generally, dialect and accent use in film productions that are not original to the actors portraying them commonly pose challenges and opportunities as much as the dialect/accents coach provides adequate training for the actors. One of the challenges is ensuring the accurate and respectful representation of dialect, as misrepresentations can perpetuate stereotypes or reinforce biases. Wanner (2012) posed the question of whether Hollywood's appropriation of

South African stories while neglecting to cast South African actors constitutes cultural imperialism. He ultimately concluded that insisting on only South African actors for these roles would be impractical and potentially xenophobic. While some actors have been able to accurately portray characters from different cultures and speak other languages, implementing a dialect is often part of embodying a character. However, an actor's ability to mimic does not guarantee authenticity or accuracy.

Indigenous speakers of a dialect often feel slighted when there is an inaccurate depiction of their dialect and accent in films or plays. When filmmakers or actors fail to make the necessary effort to portray a specific dialect or accent accurately, it can perpetuate stereotypes and misrepresent the culture and language associated with it. This is particularly significant regarding African accents, given the linguistic diversity across the continent with its 54 countries. According to Mazibuko (2022):

For starters, we as Africans are tired of Western actors being trained into spotless British accents, yet zero effort is put into accurately portraying African accents. For example, T'Challa's father from Black Panther spoke Xhosa, a South African and Zimbabwean language, yet T'Challa speaks in a "Nigerian" accent. This was offensive because Western media treats Africa like it's a country—the film industry has created a generic fictional "African accent" for a continent with 54 countries. (Eyala 2022)

The frustration expressed by Africans towards the lack of effort in accurately representing their accents is valid. The film industry and media must invest in authentic representation by working with native speakers or individuals familiar with the specific dialect or accent required for a role (Massai, 2020). This approach respects Africa's linguistic diversity and allows for a more genuine and respectful depiction of the cultures and people involved. The specification of the character i.e., physical, social status, educational status, psychological status, environment, gender, sexual preference, socioeconomic status, and profession, will overall affect the development of the actor's character and particular idiolect (McGuire, 2016) To transform into a character truly, an actor must also understand their physical and psychological traits, as well as the cultural context in which they exist. While dialogue or dialect coaches may not be solely responsible for these aspects, they are important when shaping the character's voice and idiolect. Therefore, dialect coaches must collaborate with other departments involved in creating the film's cultural paradigm, including the director, costume designer, make-up designer, cultural consultant, and cast members.

Achieving a balance between authenticity and audience comprehension can be challenging, particularly when dealing with lesser-known or concrete accents. Filmmakers and playwrights must conduct thorough research and consult with language experts or native speakers to ensure the appropriate use of accents. These artists may also face challenges in mastering dialects significantly different from their own linguistic background. Delivering a convincing performance requires dedicated practice, linguistic sensitivity, and cultural understanding. Language or dialect coaches can play a crucial role in assisting actors with dialect acquisition and helping them navigate the nuances of pronunciation, intonation, and speech patterns.

Horsthemke (2014) opines that “the voice can be affected by many factors, and actors under pressure often suffer from loss of phonation through stress and fatigue. This added strain on the actor could contribute to vocal articulatory incompetence. For this reason, I tried to keep the debate and opinion out of our coaching room.” Actors encounter several challenges when trying to incorporate an accent into their performance, which could negatively impact their voice and speech. Coaches have to approach implementing a dialect foreign to the actor carefully. Horsthemke (2014) goes on to state, “In my experience when I coached an actor’s accent acquisition under extreme duress and excessively high expectation, the actor suffered a loss of voice and articulatory incompetence resulting in partial paralysis caused by a psychological ‘block’ and the actor was not able to make the appropriate placement shifts” (Horsthemke: 2014, 22).

Despite the challenges, using accents in stage and film productions presents opportunities for cultural exchange, learning, and promoting diversity in the industry. It allows for celebrating linguistic and cultural heritage, giving voice to underrepresented communities and fostering a greater appreciation for different languages and accents. By incorporating accents authentically, productions can contribute to preserving and revitalizing endangered or marginalized languages, creating opportunities for dialogue and understanding among diverse audiences.

Conclusion

The effect of dialect and accent play significant roles in stage and film productions, impacting character portrayal, cultural representation, and audience perception. In *The Woman King* production, dialect and accents were employed as a tool for believability, intelligibility, and

authenticity to portray accurate or near perfect cultural representation and overall allow for a more convincing accent immersion in encouraging future films showcasing and telling underrepresented language, dialect, and accent for cinematic experience. Furthermore, dialect and accent add depth and clarity to the characters' identities, informing the audience to many degrees as they foster a greater understanding and appreciation for diverse cultures. The audience's perception and reception of the selected actors' portrayal of dialect and accent usage were generally positive. The intelligibility and authenticity allow upcoming producers to engage with specialist dialect and accent coaches to enhance their engagement and emotional response to productions to audience delight. The audience's critical appraisal will continue to shed light on future productions by Africans telling their stories with a good mastering of the dialects and accents, especially for cinematic experience. Filmmakers should take note of the proper implementation of dialect and accent in their productions.

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