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**AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL ENGLISH IN CONTEMPORARY
CINEMATOGRAPHY**

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CONTENTS

1	Introduction	1
1.2	Historical and social background: origins of Aboriginal English.....	1
1.3	Aboriginal English today	2
1.4	The most common linguistic features of Aboriginal English.....	3
1.4.1	Phonetics and Phonology	3
1.4.2	Grammar	4
1.4.3	Lexicon	4
1.4.4	Pragmatics	5
2	Empirical research: Aboriginal English in <i>Australia, The Tracker</i> and <i>Rabbit Proof Fence</i>	6
2.1	Phonetics and phonology	6
2.1.1	Vowels	6
2.1.2	Consonants	8
2.1.3	Suprasegmentals	8
2.1.4	Phonotactics and morphophonemics	10
2.2	Grammar.....	11
2.2.1	Verb phrase	11
2.2.2	Noun phrase	15
2.2.3	The structure of clauses and sentences	16
2.3	Lexicon	18
2.4	Nonverbal communication	20
3	Conclusion	21
	REFERENCES.....	24

Australian Aboriginal English in Contemporary Cinematography

Abstract:

In this MA thesis, Australian Aboriginal English is analysed on the basis of three films, *Australia*, *The Tracker* and *Rabbit Proof Fence*. The thesis begins with a short historical and social background of the emergence of the variety as well as the linguistic factors that influenced its development. The fact that Aboriginal English is a set of continua ranging from basilectal varieties which are close to the creole, and acrolectal varieties which are close to Standard English is clarified. Aboriginal English is stated as the third major non-Standard variety spoken throughout the whole continent and Torres Strait Islands. In addition, it is a symbol of Aboriginal identity. Then, some major linguistic features present in the majority of basilectal and acrolectal varieties of the variety are outlined. Upon completion of this, Australian Aboriginal English in the three films under consideration is analysed on the phonetical, phonological, grammatical and lexical level. Lastly, gestures are illustrated as an essential part of the nonverbal communication in the films at hand. They are shown to be substituting utterances in certain cases. In the conclusion part of this thesis, it is remarked that the portrayal of the variety varies in the films. From the acrolectal varieties in *Australia*, to the varieties close to the basilectal spectrum of the dialect continua. These are found in *The Tracker* and *Rabbit Proof Fence*. Further on, the difference in the variety is observed within the same films, even in the speech of the same characters. The focus is often on the acrolectal side of the dialect continua in order to make it as intelligible as possible, especially in *Australia*. Finally, the diversity of the varieties within Australian Aboriginal English is demonstrated on the basis of these three films in which the variety frequently tends towards linguistic regularization to achieve intelligibility.

Key words: Australian Aboriginal English, Standard Australian English, acrolectal varieties, basilectal varieties, films

1 Introduction

Not long after Captain Cook's arrival on the Australian Continent in 1776, the first permanent basis of English speakers was established in 1788. Further occupation of the continent and contact of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander speakers with English resulted in the development of contact varieties. These contact varieties gave birth to three major varieties currently spoken in Australia, two of which are derived from English, but are not varieties of English. They are creole varieties. The first one is Kriol, spoken in the Northern Territory, North West Queensland and the Kimberly region of West Australia, and the second one is Cape York Creole, or Broken, spoken in the Torres Strait Islands and around the Cape York Peninsula. Aboriginal English is the third major variety spoken in the context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. It, however, encompasses numerous regional varieties as a consequence of complex historical and social background.

1. 2 Historical and social background: origins of Aboriginal English

The complexity of historical and social background of Aboriginal English indicates its diverse origin. On the one side, its development can be traced back to the same point of origin which it shares with Kriol, that is, the New South Wales (NSW) Pidgin. NSW Pidgin arose not long after the establishment of the first permanent settlement as a means of cross-cultural communication between Aboriginal people and the English-speaking colonists. Soon it became a lingua franca of Indigenous people who were brought together by the colonial expansion through the continent. In short, NSW Pidgin came to be an essential means of communication in colonial Australia, and it developed two major varieties, one for the cross-cultural communication more influenced by the English superstrate, and other for the communication among Aboriginal people more influenced by the Aboriginal substrate. Its use by Indigenous people alongside routes of colonial expansion presented a framework for the development of related pidgins, creoles and non-Standard varieties of English.

Aboriginal English, as a non-StE ethnolect was developed from NSW Pidgin through the process of depidginization due to the overwhelming and increasing influence of English. For this reason it developed into a variety of English rather than an independent language. Parallel to this, Aboriginal English also developed through the process of decreolization in the areas where Kriol subsequently developed. Apart from these linguistic processes, Aboriginal English developed by 'Aboriginalization' of English. This occurred in the areas where

English was spoken as a first language by Aboriginal people. They made the language of their dominators to fit their needs. English was influenced by Aboriginal languages and made a vital part of Aboriginal culture and identity. Finally, another factor important for the development of Aboriginal varieties of English is the pervasive death of Aboriginal languages throughout the continent. We have thus seen the complex development of Aboriginal varieties of English influenced by various historical, social and linguistic elements.

1.3 Aboriginal English today

It is important to repeat the fact that Aboriginal English is not one unified dialect, but rather there are, as Eades (1996:134) puts it: “a number of Aboriginal English dialects, or more accurately a range of continua of Aboriginal English dialects, from light varieties, which are close to Standard English at one end (the acrolect), to heavy varieties, which are close to Aboriginal Kriol at other end (the basilect)”. These varieties are spoken throughout Australia in Aboriginal contexts. For many Indigenous Australian people, Aboriginal English is only one segment of their multilingual repertoire. In the areas where traditional languages or creoles are not spoken, it is supposed to be the first language of most Aboriginal population. The basilectal varieties are used in more remote regions under the influence of creoles while the acrolectal varieties are used in urban areas. In more remote areas, Aboriginal English is spoken in communication with non-Aboriginal people, while in less remote areas, its heavier varieties are used among Aboriginal people, and lighter varieties, even Standard Australian English in the communication with non-Aboriginal people. To briefly illustrate the difference between the acrolect and the basilect, the following example is provided.

SE	Light AE	Heavy AE
We waited a very long time.	<i>We waited a looong time.</i>	<i>We bin wait looong time.</i>

To conclude, Aboriginal English, in its heavier or lighter varieties, is used to facilitate the communication among Aboriginal people and between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. What is more, it is a symbol of Aboriginal identity. Its importance is increased in contexts of intermarriage with non-Aboriginal people where it represents an overt evidence of belonging to the Aboriginal culture.

1.4 The most common linguistic features of Aboriginal English

Before dealing with Aboriginal English on the basis of the three chosen films, a short framework of its most common features on all linguistic levels will be provided. Even though this dialect of English encompasses numerous continua of dialects from basilectal to acrolectal varieties, all of them are characterized by certain features they share and that unite them under the name of Aboriginal English. The features that will be outlined here also show major contrast with Standard English.

1.4.1 Phonetics and phonology

One of the most salient phonological features of Aboriginal English that appears even in the lightest varieties is the initial H-Dropping (Eades 1996). This is probably the influence of Irish and Cockney varieties of English that were brought to Australia by the convicts, but also by the lack of this phoneme in the sound system of the traditional Aboriginal languages. Aboriginal English is the only variety on the continent that exhibits this feature. It can be seen in the examples such as *at* ‘hat’ or *Arry* ‘Harry’. On the other hand, there is a tendency to overcompensate, (called hypercorrection) by some speakers who add an extra *h* to words that start in vowel as in *huncler* ‘uncle’, *hant* ‘aunt’ and *happle* ‘apple’. The particularity of the consonant system of Aboriginal English is its lack of voicing and manner-of-articulation distinctions as an influence from traditional Aboriginal languages.

As far as vowel system is concerned, there are varieties of Aboriginal English with 5-vowel system and 3-vowel system. Both systems are present in basilectal varieties, nevertheless, those varieties heavily influenced by the Aboriginal language substratum exhibit 3-vowel system. Although, in comparison to the vowel system of Standard Australian English, the basilectal Aboriginal English vowel system may seem severely restricted, it demonstrates a wide range of allophonic variation. The prominent example is seen in the fronting and raising of vowels in the presence of palatals, as in [ʃʊt], ‘shoot’ (Butcher 2008).

1.4.2 Grammar

Another feature present only in this non-Standard variety of English in Australia is the juxtaposition of two noun phrases in descriptive and equational sentences. This is also an influence from the traditional Aboriginal languages (Eades 1996).

SE	AE
My uncle Jim's back there.	<i>My uncle back there, uncle Jim.</i>
He's my cousin.	<i>'E my cousin brother.</i>

Following this grammatical feature, another representative feature of Aboriginal English is the expression of possession where the possessor and the possession are juxtaposed. It would be wrong to assume that this construction is a result of dropping off the possessive –s suffix which denotes possession in Standard English, because it reflects a grammatical pattern typical for the traditional Aboriginal languages.

SE	AE
Where is Tom's house?	<i>Where Tom 'ouse?</i>

1.4.3 Lexicon

Along with the phonological and grammatical features, lexicon is what gives Aboriginal English its special and distinctive flavour. Traditional Aboriginal languages have left a considerable mark on its vocabulary. Nowhere is it seen more evidently as in naming local flora and fauna in regional basilectal varieties. Lexical items influenced by traditional languages and widely used across Australia or its larger regions are names Aboriginal people give to themselves and to non-Aboriginal people. The following few examples illustrate how Aboriginal people call themselves across different regions.

<i>Koori</i>	Victoria and southern NSW
<i>Murri</i>	northern NSW and south-east Queensland
<i>Yolngu</i>	Arnhem Land
<i>Nyoonga</i>	southern Western Australia

The two words for non-Aboriginal people that are most common are *gubba* (probably originating from ‘government man’), used in south-eastern Australia, and *balanda* (a linguistic adaptation of ‘Hollander’ in Maccassarese), used in Arnhem Land and on the coast of Northern Territory (Buthcer 2008).

Aboriginal English contains words from Standard English but with differences in meaning. This dialectal variation is evident in the examples such as the words *mother* and *country*. In Aboriginal English, *mother* is not just a woman who gave birth to a person, but also that woman’s sister; and *country* is not just a land in general, but also ‘a place of belonging’. Some other examples (Eades 1996) are:

SE	AE
raise (a child)	<i>grow (a child) up</i>
mob	<i>group</i>
big mob	<i>a lot of</i>
camp	<i>home</i>
spirited, aggressive, dangerous	<i>cheeky</i>

1.4.4 Pragmatics

In order to establish a successful cross-cultural communication, being familiar with the pragmatic features of Aboriginal English is as important as having the knowledge of its linguistic features. There are some pragmatic features of Aboriginal English common to many of its varieties, basilectal and acrolectal. Hinting or triggering questions are one example. These are used instead of direct questions. Silence is another important feature of Aboriginal English. In Aboriginal interaction, the seeking of substantial information is often followed by silence which is interpreted as an invitation for another participant to import information in the conversation (Eades 1991).

2.2 Empirical research: Aboriginal English in *Australia*, *The Tracker* and *Rabbit Proof Fence*

The analysis of Australian Aboriginal English that will be presented here is based on the three following films: *Australia*, henceforth abbreviated as A, an epic historical romantic drama directed by Baz Luhrmann in 2008; *Rabbit Proof Fence*, henceforth abbreviated as RBF, a drama directed by Phillip Noyce in 2002 and *The Tracker*, henceforth abbreviated as T, a drama directed by Rolf de Heer in 2002. The representation of Aboriginal English variety differs in all three films, it even differs from one character to another. This is significant to such an extent that after watching these films it becomes clear that Aboriginal English is not one dialect, but a set of continua ranging from heavier to lighter varieties.

2.1 Phonetics and phonology

2.1.1 Vowels

The vowel system of Aboriginal English from the three films consists of five vowels, /i/, /e/, /a/, /o/, /u/. We will begin our analysis with the high front vowel /i/. The long monophthong may be shortened. In the word ‘creek’ it is pronounced as short [kɪk], T (1:28:54). The same thing happens with ‘keep’ which is pronounced as [kɪp], T (1:21:49). There is one case in *Rabbit Proof Fence* (52:41) in the word ‘blanket’ where it is pronounced as [ɛ]. It can also be pronounced as [u] in ‘missus’, A (26:18). There are cases in all three films where /i/ and /ɪ/ are used interchangeably, so ‘she’ is pronounced as [ʃɪ], RPF (1:00:29), and ‘quick’ as [kwɪk], RPF (52:40). In many cases from all three films there is no opposition between the front mid vowels /æ/ and /ɛ/. So ‘rabbit’, ‘that’ and ‘magic’ may become [ɹæbit], RPF (07:39), [dɛt] T (36:11) and [ˈmædʒɪk], A (2:24:20) respectively. The mid front vowel /æ/ may become low central /a/ as in [dam], ‘damn’, T (35:46).

The mid central vowel /ɜ:/ is often shortened as in ‘thirsty’ [tɜsti], T (54:39). It may be replaced with the diphthong /ɛə/ as in ‘heard’ [hɛəd], RPF (38:47). The short vowel schwa /ə/ has a number of realizations in the films. It may be replaced by the mid back vowel /ɔ/ as in the word ‘cannibals’ which is pronounced as [ˈkænɪbəlz], T (28:39), or the proper name Dutton which is pronounced as [ˈdʌtʊt], A (1:49:24). It can also be replaced by the mid central vowel /ʌ/. Some of the examples are the word ‘probably’, pronounced as [ˈpɹɔbɹəbli], T (1:28:31), and the word ‘woman’ pronounced as [wʊmʌn], T (1:25:40). Further on, schwa

may be supplanted by the high back vowel /u/, so the word ‘devil’ will be pronounced as [devul], RPF (08:26). The word ‘invisible’ will be pronounced as [ɪn'vizibul], A (24:22). In these examples schwa is replaced by the high back vowel.

The low central vowel /a/ is very common in Aboriginal English in the films. Very often, it supplants the schwa vowel. The examples are the words ‘river’ and ‘twister’ where it occurs at the end, so the words are pronounced as [ˈrɪva], A (25:51) and [ˈtwɪstə], A (50:26) respectively. This can also be seen in the words such as ‘along’ and ‘walkabout’ which are pronounced as [aˈlɔŋ], A (12:45) and [ˈwɔkəbət], A (1:49:01) respectively.

There are many instances in all three films where the mid back vowel /ɔ/ is used instead of /ɒ/. This probably happens because Aboriginal English tends towards raising of vowels. So ‘rock’, ‘mob’ and ‘boss’ are pronounced as [ɹɔk], RPF (37:16), [mɔb], A (2:19:16) and [bɔs], T (04:36). There are instances in *Australia* and *The Tracker* where the last two words are pronounced as [mɔb], (2:03:27) and [bɔs], (04:27). The high back vowel /u/ is also very common in the films. Still, it may be used interchangeably with the high central vowel /ʌ/. So ‘good’ and ‘lookin’ are [gud], T (49:07), A (51:18) and [lukɪn] A, (25:49) but ‘school’, ‘food’ and ‘boot’ are [skʌl], RPF (20:58), [fʊd] RPF (37:19) and [bʊt], A (02:02:01) respectively. There is one example in *Rabbit Proof Fence* (01:01:44) where ‘truth’ is pronounced as [tɹi:t].

As for diphthongs, these are often monophthongized in the films. The diphthong /ɔɪ/ in ‘boy’ A (26:05) seems to undergo no phonological change. On the other hand, the diphthong /əʊ/ may be pronounced in several different ways. In the first place, it may become a diphthong /ɔʊ/ in ‘home’ and ‘drover’, so these words become [hɔʊm], RPF (28:44) and [dɹɔʊvə], A (01:48:33). In the word ‘waterhole’ it becomes /aʊ/, so it is pronounced as [ˈwɔtəhɔʊl], T (1:26:40). Then, the diphthong is monophthongized in the following examples: ‘grow’ is pronounced as [gɹɔ:], A (2:33:09), and ‘rainbow’ as [ˈɹeɪnbɔ], A (24:43), ‘stone’ and ‘whole’ are [stɔn], T (38:10) and [hɔl], A (2:00:57). ‘Know’ may be pronounced as [nɔ], T (1:28:37) and in ‘no-good’ it is pronounced as [ˈnu ˈgud], A (52:06). The majority of this diphthong’s realizations are back vowels.

Moving on to other diphthongs, /ɪə/ may become [i] in ‘real’, RPF (31:44) and [ɪə] in ‘fear’, A (58:29). /eɪ/ may become [e] in ‘straight’, T (23:44) and ‘make’, A (25:15) and [aɪ] in ‘maybe’, T (36:41). /aɪ/ may become [a] in ‘myself’, A (24:22) and [aɛ] in ‘tied’, T (1:28:54). /aʊ/ becomes [a] in ‘now’, T (1:22:21) and ‘about’, T (04:27). The diphthongs /æɪ/,

/əʌ/, /æ/ from Australian English show little movement in the pronunciation of some characters, Bandy and Magarri from *Australia*; Maude, Nina, a man and a woman from *Rabbit Proof Fence* who help the three little girls on their way home, and a man who tries to trick them. Daisy's and Gracie's pronunciation of these diphthongs is also very similar to that of Australian English, but Molly's pronunciation is not so close to Australian English.

Another particularity of Aboriginal English shown in the pronunciation of all characters from all three movies is the lack of nasalization of vowels in sequences where nasals come after vowels. The words 'wrong' and 'fence' are pronounced as [ɹŋŋ], A (25:14) and [fens], RPF (07:39) with the velum raised until the end of the word.

2.1.2 Consonants

The majority of consonants from the Standard English consonant system are present in Aboriginal English consonant system, including /h/. As it has already been explained, the initial H-Dropping is one of the dialect's most salient phonological features occurring very often even in the lighter varieties; nevertheless, the initial /h/ often appears in the films. This is specially the case with *Australia*. In the following examples the boy, Nullah, is accentuating every /h/ during the narration.

- 1) *He even let her sit in his special place.* (12:28)
- 2) *He teach me sing a fish song.* (58:26)
- 3) *Everybody happy.* (1:26:01)

The particularity of the Aboriginal English consonant system is in that the boundaries between consonants are not clear cut when referring to voicing and place-of-articulation. As for the distinction between voicing and non-voicing, the films under consideration show that there is not any specific rule. So, 'beat' may become [bi:d], RPF (38:51) and 'gettin' [ketin], T (04:27). The proper name 'Daisy' may be pronounced as [deisi], RPF (34:34) and [deizi], (28:54). 'Bulls' may be both [buls], A (52:08) and [bulz], (54:58). 'Savage' may become [saviʃ], T (1:06:46) and 'beck' and 'boss' may be pronounced as [pɛk], T (1:29:25) and [pos], (57:37).

As far as the place-of-articulation is concerned, the following examples demonstrate the preference of stop consonants over fricatives. So, the interdental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/ are

substituted for alveolar stops /t/ and /d/. This is also a feature of many other non-Standard varieties of English. Further on, labio-dental fricatives /f/ and /v/ are substituted for bilabial stops /p/ and /b/ in ‘devil’, ‘blackfella’ and ‘enough’ which may be pronounced as [’debil], RPF (20:04), [’blækpela], T (54:48) and [i’nap], (38:37). There is one example in *The Tracker* (18:58) in the word ‘much’ where the affricate /tʃ/ becomes [ts], so it is pronounced as [mats]. As it is demonstrated by Butcher (2008:5), these six sibilants, /s, z, ʃ, ʒ, tʃ, dʒ/ may be represented by the alveopalatal stop /c/, specific to a great number of traditional Aboriginal languages. In the film, it is heard in *The Tracker* (1:15:48) where the word initial affricate in ‘judge’ is replaced by the stop /c/. The only example of the movement of the nasals is found in the proper name ‘Dutton’ where /n/ is replaced by the dental stop [t], A (1:49:24). From all these examples it is clear that the major changes happen in the obstruent class where the tendency is towards the pronunciation of the stop consonants instead of the fricatives.

Lastly, the phoneme /l/ is almost constantly realized as a clear alveolar lateral. This feature is markedly different from the Standard variety. It is realized as a clear /l/ even in the word final positions such as in the words ‘kill’, T (1:25:40) and ‘special’, A (12:30). The phoneme /r/, aside from its retroflexed variant, may be realized as a trill or a flap. Its trilled variant is found in examples such as ‘Magarri’, A (2:17:21) ‘gotta’, (52:06) and ‘hotter’ (1:17:21). The flap variant is found in ‘get up’, RPF (52:34) and ‘get’im’ T (07:05). Aside from the proper name of Aboriginal origin, these examples have illustrated that the dialect in some case trills and in the other flaps the intervocalic stops. Concerning consonants, one more particularity of Aboriginal English is the lack of aspiration in stressed syllables beginning in voiceless stops.

2.1.3 Suprasegmentals

What can be pointed out regarding the intonation of Aboriginal English is the rising of pitch at the end of an utterance. It is a predominant feature found in all three films, especially in *The Tracker* and *Rabbit Proof Fence* since those two films exhibit more basilectal varieties of the dialect. The rise in pitch, lengthening of the vowel and slowing down of speed is particular for making an emphasis. It is greatly present in the speech of Nullah, a character from *Australia*, since he is the narrator in the film. The following examples illustrate this feature.

faaancy truck.

4) *Drover take Mrs Boss to Faraway Downs in a great, big,* (12:25)

aaall the way...

5) *So we start crackin them whips an drivin them cheeky bulls* (54:56)

threee days.

6) *An we went on fo* (1:17:16)

In the prosody of Aboriginal English stress falls on the first syllable of the word. This is more evident in basilectal varieties of the dialect. The prototypical example found in *Rabbit Proof Fence* is the word ‘kangaroo’ which is pronounced as [ˈkɛŋgəɹu] (37:14). Other example from *The Tracker* is the word ‘Aboriginal’ which becomes [ˈabɔɹɪdʒɪnəl] (1:26:37). This shows the preference of Aboriginal English towards the trochaic feet as opposed to the iambic feet present in the Standard variety. The following examples where the trochaic feet are present come from *Australia* and *Rabbit Proof Fence*.

/ / /

7) *That day, I see'em them white fellas.* (02:31)

/ / / / /

8) *That tracker, e's gonna get us an put us in that boob.* (28:58)

This particular feature gives Aboriginal English a specific rhythm. Moreover, it affects the phonotactics and morphophonemics of the dialect.

2.1.4 Phonotactics and morphophonemics

The phonotactics of Aboriginal English shows that the dialect tends to reduce consonant clusters. As a consequence, [ə] may be inserted as in [ˈɪŋgələnd] and [ˈwɪsəlɪn] for ‘England’ and ‘whistling’. Further on, the final obstruents may be left out from the words such as ‘just’, ‘important’, ‘fast’ and ‘respect’. The tendency to reduce syllables is demonstrated with apharesis which is common in words such as [ɹaʊn] ‘around’, T (06:44), [kɹɹ] ‘becouse’, A (1:26:24), [baʊt] ‘about’, T (28:26) and [kɹɹs] ‘across’, A (25:50). The case of epenthesis is present in *Rabbit Proof Fence* (37:15) in the word [ˈɪmɪju] ‘emu’.

The definite article ‘the’ is present quite often in the films at hand; however, it is often assimilated to the consonant that comes before, and devoiced because Aboriginal English

does not make a clear distinction between voiced and voiceless consonants, as in |wi t| ‘with the’, T (1:26:41) and |ʌp t| ‘up the’ (1:28:54). There is one instance in *The Tracker* (19:23) where ‘the’ becomes [di] before a vowel. The consonants in the prepositions ‘to’ and ‘at’ are also assimilated to the neighbouring consonants, but vowels often are not neutralized. The auxiliary ‘will’ is sometimes contracted, as in |deɪ| ‘they’ll’, RPF (1:02:04) and when it retains its full form it does not lose the initial ‘w’. When present, ‘was’ also does not lose the initial consonant. It is present in the following examples: |wara| ‘what are’, RPF (20:46), |waɪfjɔ| ‘what you’, (40:28). The palatalization is seen in |geɪfjɔ| ‘get your’, (28:39) the same as in the previous example, while the flapping of intervocalic stop is shown in the first example.

It is seen from these examples that the phonotactic and morphophonemic rules obey the principle of syllable reduction and consonant assimilation to enable the realization of stress patterns specific to Aboriginal English. Vowels undergo the same treatment from this reason too. There are a few instances in *The Tracker* where two linguistic items are pronounced as one: ‘couple hours’ becomes [kʌplɑʊz], (36:42) and ‘beck there’ becomes [ˈbektɛ], (40:43).

2.2 Grammar

2.2.1 Verb phrase

Aboriginal English often does not mark the third person present tense with a singular subject. Nevertheless, the regular subject-verb agreement in the present tense appears in the films under consideration. In addition, both forms may be found within the same sentence.

9) *Mrs Boss say he likes her tea so much, it gives him a blind eye...* (A 1:42:57)

10) *Bad place. Make me sick.* (RPF 27:05)

11) *E want your rifle, boss.* (T 1:22:49)

The past tense verbs are frequently marked in the films, but, if they are unmarked, there are other clues that reveal the past sense, or it may simply be gathered from the context of the sentence.

12) *When Mrs Boss first come to this land, she look but she not see.* (A 56:46)

13) *Just like Drover say, that rain make everything come alive.* (A 1:42:42)

The same case of an unmarked verb denoting past sense can be seen in example 7. The past tense verbs are in fact marked quite often and surprisingly regularly. Most discrepancies occur in *Australia* where irregular verbs usually do not acquire their form. In *The Tracker* and *Rabbit Proof Fence* regular verbs generally get the –ed suffix. The next example, and the only one of this kind, shows the past participle used instead of the simple past form.

14) *So, that's why I took 'im down the billabong, shown 'im all the big, fat, cheeky bulls.* (A 25:42)

As far as the verb 'be' is concerned, the form for past, 'was', is not found in all positions. That is, both forms, 'was' and 'were' are used regularly. There is only one case of irregularity found in *The Tracker*.

15) *I thought you was on a lookout.* (40:48)

The next case exhibits the creole past marker 'bin' used in the past simple tense.

16) *That balanda Fletcher bin curse to this place...* (A 24:36)

The present perfect tense appears in only two examples, and without the auxiliary verb.

17) *The strangest woman I ever seen.* (A 04:43)

18) *Broken the law, Aboriginal law.* (T 1:26:36)

There are several ways to indicate future tense. The auxiliary verb 'will' is used surprisingly often in all three films. It can also be expressed with an unmarked verb, as in

19) *We go cross mornin.* (T 49:04)

Another way of expressing the future tense in the films is by using certain forms of the verbs 'go' and 'get', such as 'gonna' and 'gotta'.

20) *He gonna sing for us.* (A 1:16:38)

21) *They gotta take them to Sister Kate's.* (RPF 20:53)

Moreover, the form 'gotta' is used to express necessity in addition to futurity.

Further on, to express the progressive aspect, the present participle is used without the auxiliary in most cases.

22) *I donno what you sayin', boss.* (T 28:49)

If the past tense is important for the context, the auxiliary or the past marker 'bin' will be used.

23) *They were pushing them cheeky bulls across the river onto Carney land.* (A 02:32)

24) *I bin thinkin', I'm gonna sing her to me.* (A 23:21)

The verb in the last example with the past marker 'bin' may denote the past continuous or the present perfect continuous. The perfective aspect is usually expressed with the same marker in the preverbal position.

25) *But that Drover, him bin gone far, far away on that big army drove.* (A 2:01:11)

The passive, used rarely in Aboriginal English, occurs mostly in *The Tracker*. In the majority of cases, the auxiliary verb is present, but in the following example it does not appear.

26) *Bin left as a warnin' to the whitefellas, boss.* (he) (1:20:24)

In the following example, the passive is formed with the auxiliary verb 'get'.

27) *Get pushed cross that river over to Carney land.* (A 25:50)

There are a few ways of expressing negation. Double negation, also a feature of other non-Standard varieties, appears a few times in the films at hand.

28) *He can't hurt mama nomo.* (A 32:27)

29) *I don see nothing.* (RPF 37:17)

If auxiliary verb is used, it is negated by 'not', and frequently reduced to 'n', as seen in the previous example.

30) *Caan help where the blackfella goes.* (T 54:47)

Preverbal negator 'not' is frequently found, especially in *Australia*.

31) *He say this not work.* (A 30:10)

32) *E ses e not kill a white woman, boss.* (T 1:25:39)

Another salient and easily noticeable grammatical feature of Aboriginal English present in all three films is the absence of the copula in stative clauses.

33) *Mama say I gulapa. I magic man. I wizard man.* (A 49:52)

34) *That sacred country there, boss.* (T 48:58)

35) *Jigalong that way.* (RPF 39:23)

There are also cases of the copula missing between the subject and its adjective complement.

36) *King George angry at them whitefellas.* (A 02:42)

37) *She pridi clever, dat girl.* (1:00:29)

Further on, the tendency to avoid the auxiliary ‘be’ in existential clauses is occasionally present in the films at hand.

38) *No rain.* (RPF 34:03)

39) *Plenty sign like this.* (T 38:39)

In addition, these are verbless clauses. They represent another way of forming existential clauses. In the following example, ‘be’ is replaced with ‘got’.

40) *Some places got spirits.* (A 57:12)

A grammatical feature present only in *Australia*, possibly as a result of the creole presence in the film, is the suffix –em added to transitive verbs.

41) *My grandfather, King George, he takeem me walkabout. Teach me blackfella way. Grandfather teachem me most important lesson of all. Tellem story.* (01:45)

There are many more instances in the films under consideration where adverbs retain the –ly suffix than the other way around. Nevertheless, next examples show adverbs without the –ly suffix.

42) *I ride'em real bloody good!* (A 39:53)

43) *Sing-song real good cooker!* (A 39:35)

In example 43, a term for object is used to denote the related occupation. In Standard English, the –er suffix is often used to form nouns designating persons from the object of their occupation, but this particular noun, ‘cooker’ is an exception. It is probable that the dialect ignores irregularities of the Standard variety, and thus, the name for object becomes the name for the related occupation.

‘Plenty’ is used extensively in the films. As an adverb, it may replace other adverbs more suitable for certain contexts, such as

44) *He plenty funny.* (A 25:40)

It is also present as a quantifier in

45) *Gulapa teach me plenty songs.* (A 58:35)

46) *Plenty trouble comin’, boss.* (T 36:11)

The next example from *Rabbit Proof Fence* shows the degree modifier adverbs retaining the same form as adjectives.

47) *Mister Neville said you better come real quick.* (31:43)

The same thing happens in examples 42 and 43.

2.2.2 Noun phrase

Within the noun phrase, determiners are observed to undergo major change. Demonstratives ‘that’ and ‘them’ are commonly used instead of the definite article. ‘Them’ may also be found as replacing ‘those’. On the other hand, the indefinite article is often omitted in cases where it should be used. However, a strong tendency to retain articles as they are in Standard English is found. In the following sentences, both definite and indefinite article follow the morphophonemic rule of becoming [di] and [ən] in front of a vowel.

48) *No such thing as an innocent black. The only innocent black is a dead black.* (T 19:18)

In the next two examples, the plural inflection is missing from the nouns but there are other indicators of their plurality.

49) *They got two rabbit-proof fence?* (RPF 49:25)

50) *King George say them whitefella bad spirit.* (A 02:48)

Adjectives are used according to Standard English in the majority of cases. They are regularly inflected for the comparative with the –er suffix. There is one example in *Rabbit Proof Fence*, (51:39) ‘the furtherest’, where the suffix for superlative is added to the

comparative form. Regarding possession, which is usually expressed with the juxtaposition of nouns in Aboriginal English, in the films it is marked with the –s suffix, in accordance with Standard English. In the next example, the postnominal phrase with ‘belong to’ expresses possession. In this sentence, however, the preposition is omitted, as it usually happens in Aboriginal English.

51) *That's how you keep them people belong you always.* (A 2:34:16)

There are no irregularities concerning the third person singular pronouns which may be used interchangeably for male and female referents. In the films at hand, they follow the rules of Standard English.

Prepositions are often omitted from Aboriginal English. The infinitive marker ‘to’ is also often omitted as in:

52) *Me belong no one.* (A 1:26:36)

In the previous example, the pronoun form for object is found in the subject function. It occurs quite often in all three films.

53) *We better go with 'im, boss. See what 'im wan.* (T 1:22:43)

54) *Him always punctual.* (A 16:33)

The forms for pronouns in Aboriginal English in the films at hand differ from Standard English only in the second person plural. This form appears only in *Rabbit Proof Fence*.

55) *Police are up an' down the country lookin' for youse.* (1:00:53)

One of the other features concerning the pronoun system is the use of ‘me’ in coordinated subjects. The following example is found in *Australia*.

56) *Me and you secret.* (25:26)

The sense of this sentence is that the secret will be kept between two people, in this case between Nullah and Mrs Boss. The next example from *The Tracker* illustrates personal dative.

57) *Got me blurry big headache, boss.* (1:19:58)

In the succeeding example from *Rabbit Proof Fence*, the object pronoun ‘us’ is used with a singular referent.

58) *Daisy, give me your bag. Give us your bag, quick! Give us it!* (34:35)

This is also a feature of Geordie, the dialect of English from Newcastle.

3.3 The structure of clauses and sentences

The usual word order in Aboriginal English is the SVO pattern. However, topicalization of a complement or a subject also occurs commonly, as found in the present corpus.

59) *This land, my people got many names for..* (A 04:53)

60) *She pridi clever, dat girl. She wants to go home.* (RPF (1:00:29)

Apart from omitting the verb 'to be' in statement clauses, Aboriginal English omits the auxiliary in questions too. So, wh-questions are formed without auxiliary and without inversion.

61) *Where dat rabbit fence?* (RPF 43:06)

Yes/no questions, indicated by the rising intonation, are formed by using the stative structure and without auxiliary, although in the movies, both features are not pervasive. Questions may be formed according to the rules of Standard English.

62) *You know what you doin'?* (RPF 32:36)

The same question form is evident in example 49. In addition, yes/no questions are formed by using question tag. In the films from the present corpus, the question tag 'eh?' is used.

63) *We nearly had 'im, eh boss?* (T 1:06:42)

64) *Might be Carney boys already bin here, eh?* (A 1:15:20)

65) *You from that Moore River place, eh?* (RPF 35:15)

The structure that is present in the films and which represents a recognizable feature of the variety is the paratactic structure, i.e. placing clauses or phrases one after the other without the widespread use of conjunctions.

66) *That bad Fletcher. He say you see me, you send me to the Mission Island, to that lock-lock, throw away bloody key.* (A 26:08)

67) *Broken the law, Aboriginal law. Back at the waterhole, with the woman, he rape her.* (T 1:26:36)

68) *Mama say I gulapa. I magic man. I wizard man.* (A 49:52)

In the last example parataxis is evident through the sequencing of short sentences. In the following examples verbs should be connected with the subordination, but they are not, they are rather chained one after the other as in example 66.

69) *You tell dat mista Devil, e want af cas kid, e make 'is own.* (RPF 08:32)

70) *Find that rabbit fence, we go home.* (RPF 43:44)

Another particularity of the clause structure of the dialect observed in the films consists in the subject which does not have to be repeated although there are verbs which relate to it.

71) *One thing I know. Why we tell story is the most importan of all.* (A 2:34:08)

72) *E want your rifle, boss. You better give 'im now.* (T 1:22:49)

The feature that is present in all three films, but mostly in *Australia* is the predicate marking. It means that the predicate phrase is signalled by the recovery of the subject.

73) *Than the rain, it stops. And that Drover, he go drovin'. That Mrs Boss, she always misses Drover.... That Fletcher, he the new king now.* (A 1:43:27)

74) *These horses, they coverin' 'is track.* (T 57:38)

75) *That tracker, he not gonna get us nah.* (RPF 1:15:06)

2.3 Lexicon

The lexical differences between Aboriginal English in the present corpus and Standard Australian English are mostly seen in the dialectal variation of English words. Firstly, we will mention the regional variation in the naming non-Aboriginals, present in the three films. The word 'balanda' that is used for non-Aboriginals in the Northern Territory is used in *Australia* since the action of the film is set in this region. Other names for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people used in all three films are 'blackfella' and 'whitefella', respectively. 'Bush blacks' is also a term used in *The Tracker* for Aboriginal group living in the wilderness.

To refer back to the dialectal variation, in acrolectal varieties of the dialect, it is reflected in the range of meanings different from those in Standard English. These meanings encompass aspects and concepts from Aboriginal culture and life that continue to exist through the dialect even in those areas where Aboriginal language substratum is not present. So, the difference in meaning is evident in that the word from Standard dialect usually accommodates meanings of the same word in the traditional Aboriginal languages. The particularity of Aboriginal kinship system can be seen in *Australia* on the example of the word ‘cousin’ (12:43). In the film, the narrator, Nullah, is referring to Goolajbaloong as Magarri’s cousin although it is evident that they are not blood-related. The reason why Nullah is doing so is because they are roughly the same generation.

At the very end of *The Tracker*, the ‘bush black’ (07:07) that has been the objective of the hunt is being speared in the thigh by the Tracker. This happened because he raped a woman and that woman was ‘wrong skin’ (1:26:47) for him, as the Tracker elaborates. The wrong skin means that she was the same skin group as he was, and probably his sister. Aboriginal society is based on skin groups which are determined by the skin of one’s parents. Social interaction is conditioned by the skin group one is being part of. For violating this rule, the character in the film received a punishment in accordance with the Aboriginal law, that is, a spear in his thigh. Further on, it is also determined by your skin group who you are supposed to marry. So, marrying within the ideal skin group is called the right way and within the forbidden skin group, the wrong way. These concepts may be related to the ‘wrong-side business’ (25:15) in *Australia*. It is how Nullah refers to sexual intercourse between his Indigenous mother and his Caucasian father.

‘Business’ and ‘ceremony’ are both words denoting rites of passage such as initiation, marriage and funeral. Each word is preferred in one area of the continent; however, both words are found in *Australia*. The first one is used in a negative sense while the other is used quite extensively throughout the film and in a positive sense involving Aboriginal spiritual beliefs. ‘Ceremonial dance’, ‘the Dreaming’, ‘Stories’ all refer to these spiritual beliefs. At the beginning of the film, Nullah calls Mrs Boss as *Mein Muk* (24:47) or the ‘Rainbow serpent’ who will heal the land. The ‘Rainbow serpent’ is one of the Ancestral creator Beings which gave shape to the land. ‘Walkabout’ is the word denoting Nullah’s initiation from boyhood to manhood. His grandfather, Gulapa or the magic man will lead him on that journey.

The word that is recurrent in all three films is the word ‘country’. As it has already been explained, aside from the meaning of ‘land’ in Standard English it indicates a place of belonging connected to Ancestral Beings so, in *The Tracker* the country is ‘sacred’ (48:59). The following example concerning the same word comes from *Rabbit Proof Fence*.

AE

SE

Where your country? (38:20)

Where are you from?

‘Mob’ is another Aboriginal English word used quite often in the films. It denotes a group of people and animals. ‘Lot’ has the same meaning as ‘mob’. It is used once only in *Rabbit Proof Fence* (51:18). Further on, the bulls are frequently described as ‘cheeky’ in *Australia*. In the same film, storm is being figuratively referred to as ‘the wet’ (50:31), and prison becomes ‘lock-lock’ (26:13) by lexical reduplication. Lastly, in *Rabbit Proof Fence* the word ‘boob’ is used for a toilette-sized wooden shed where the runaway girls are shaved, whipped and locked for punishment for trying to escape.

2.3 Nonverbal communication

The nonverbal communication represents a big part of Aboriginal communication because of the Aboriginal way of life in groups. Gestures are present in all three films as an integral part of communication between Indigenous Australian people. The importance of gestures for Aboriginal communication can be seen in the following excerpt from *Rabbit Proof Fence*. After running away, Molly, Daisy and Gracie encounter two Indigenous men, one carrying prepared kangaroo on his shoulders. Since they are hungry, Molly comes out from behind the tree and shows herself to the man.

Excerpt 1

Molly: (Rotates her hand lifting her chin.) Would you give us some food?

The man: (Returns with the same movement.) Is there anybody else?

Molly: (Nods to the man and gives sign with her hand to Daisy and Gracie to join her. Together, they come closer to the men.)

The man: *Hay, you from that Moore Rover place, eh?*

Gracie: *We goin’ home.*

The Man: *Where your country?*

Molly: *Jigalong.*

The Man: *Jigalong? Proper long way.* (Gives Molly a packet of matches) *You know what you doin'?*

Molly: (Nods affirmatively and takes the matches.)

In this excerpt we have seen that the gestures have replaced certain utterances and became a part of Aboriginal English. The same hand gesture appears in *Australia* between Gulapa and Nullah. Nullah signals his grandfather how much time till he 'goes walkabaout' and his grandfather signals to join him. Nullah signals back with the same gesture, but does not leave because Mrs Boss stops him.

It could be said that gestures, although nonverbal, are important for Aboriginal communication just as verbal communication. In certain situations in the three films, the communication is established via gestures rather than via words. The gestures are a sign of closeness between people within the same language group as between people within different language groups.

3 Conclusion

Aboriginal English is a dynamic language structure with its own rules, and which adequately serves the needs of its speakers. It is a symbol of Aboriginal identity that to a certain extent reflects traditional Australian Indigenous languages and preserves Aboriginal culture and way of life. Every level of the dialect is influenced by the Indigenous substratum. On the phonological level, vowels usually undergo fronting and raising and diphthongs are frequently monophthongized. Within the consonant department, major changes occur in the obstruent class where fricatives are usually replaced by stops which often tend to be unvoiced. In addition, consonant clusters generally undergo reduction. There is a strong tendency in Australian Aboriginal English to stress the initial syllable of the word. This gives the dialect a unique trochaic rhythm. On the linguistic level, many words from Standard English obtain a wider range of meanings according to those in Aboriginal languages. Other characteristics of the dialect, vital for the establishing of communication, are the pragmatic feature as silence and gestures as part of nonverbal communication.

What is evident in all three films is that the most representative phonological feature of Aboriginal English, H-Dropping, is not used consistently. The ‘h’ is often dropped in conversation, but in some cases of explanation in *The Tracker* (example 67) and narration in *Australia* (examples 1, 2, 3), the phoneme is clearly realized. Further on, there are cases in *The Tracker* where the definite and indefinite articles follow the morphophonemic rules and get their appropriate forms when in front of vowels. In a few cases in *Australia*, during Nullah’s narration, the pronunciation of interdental /θ/ and /ð/ is the same as the standard pronunciation. Regarding the pronoun system, in Aboriginal English ‘(h)im’ is used as the form for object for masculine, inanimate and feminine genders. However, in *Australia* (examples 1, 24) and *The Tracker* (example 67), there are cases where ‘her’ is used as the object form for the feminine gender, that is, the form is used according to Standard English. The possession is also expressed following the standard, that is, using the possessive –s rather than juxtaposing two nouns.

Moving on to the grammatical level, alongside the features characteristic for Aboriginal English, the dialect in the films exhibits a considerable amount of regularities in accordance with Standard English. So, although there are many cases where copula is absent from questions, stative and existential clauses, there are also cases where copula is preserved. The past simple tense is mostly expressed with an unmarked verb, especially in *Australia*. But, if the inflection for past tense is present in regular verbs, it is often regularized. As with the object pronoun ‘him’ for all genders, ‘was’ is used for singular and plural in Aboriginal English. This, however, is not the case in the present corpus. Both forms of the verb ‘to be’ are used, the singular form and the plural form. The only exception happens in *The Tracker* (example 15). To express the futurity, the forms ‘gonna’ and ‘gotta’ are used very often, but the auxiliary ‘will’ is also frequent. Regarding the clause structure, parataxis is widely present. Wh-questions are mostly formed following the Aboriginal English rules, but, on the other hand, there are many cases where the auxiliary is retained.

To demonstrate the difference in the varieties of the dialect, a few cases from the films will be illustrated. For example, in *Australia*, ‘half-cast’ is pronounced as [‘haf kast] while in *Rabbit Proof Fence* it is pronounced as [‘af kas]. In this example, the difference between the acrolectal and the basilectal variety is evident. Further on, in *Australia*, the negation ‘can’t’ is preserved in the majority of cases while in *The Tracker* and *Rabbit Proof Fence* it becomes ‘caan’ following the rules of the dialect. In *Australia*, ‘whitefella’ is pronounced as such in all cases while in *The Tracker*, sometimes it is pronounced as [‘blækfela] and sometimes as

[ˈblækpeɪlə]. The form ‘youse’ for second person plural personal pronoun is present only in *Rabbit Proof Fence*, while in the remaining two films the form is ‘you’.

It can be concluded that of all these films, *Australia* is the one with the most acrolectal variety of Aboriginal English. It is probably so because this film is made specifically for the international audience, and the filmmakers wanted it to be as intelligible as possible. That is why sometimes it comes so close to Standard Australian English and is intelligible right on the first hearing. On the other hand, the varieties of Aboriginal English in *The Tracker* and *Rabbit Proof Fence* are closer to the basilectal part of the dialect continuum. For this reason several hearings are necessary to understand certain utterances. Further on, a great deal of variation within the dialect continuum has been found in the three films. This is particularly evident in the speech of Maude from *Rabbit Proof Fence*, which is the closest to the basilectal varieties. The difference in the continuum is perceived even within the speech of the same characters. The main character in *The Tracker* is the most representative example because there are times when his speech is barely intelligible, and there are times when his grammar follows the rules of the Standard during the explanations or making an emphasis. It is evident from these three films that Aboriginal English is not one unified dialect but a set of continua ranging from basilectal varieties, close to the creole, and acrolectal varieties, close to Standard Australian English. These findings thus show that in cinematography, to achieve intelligibility, the dialect is commonly brought into accordance with the Standard.

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