

## The Exaggerated Hispanic Voices of Hank Azaria in *The Birdcage* and *America's Sweethearts*

Holly J. Nibert

Thirty-eight-year-old actor and voice artist Hank Azaria has worked in stand-up comedy, theater, television, and film since the early eighties. He did not become well known, however, until 1989, when he began providing voices for the Fox network's animated comedy series *The Simpsons*. As one of only three male voice artists in the regular cast, he gives life to approximately ten animated characters each week, including Moe the Bartender, Police Chief Wiggum, and Apu, the Kwik-E-Mart owner (Greenberg, pars. 8-9). His role as Apu, played with a thick Hindi accent, won him an Emmy Award for "Outstanding Voiceover Performance" in 1998 ("His Life," par. 7).

Having established himself as a talented voice performer capable of lending a foreign accent to English, Azaria subsequently has appeared in two different films playing the role of a Hispanic character. The first character is the Guatemalan housekeeper named Agador in the 1996 film *The Birdcage*. The second character is the Spaniard named Hector in the 2001 film *America's Sweethearts*. In both films, Azaria's English comes across unequivocally as non-native. Neither film's credits, however, indicate that a dialect coach was assigned to the actor. Thus, the speech of both characters reflects, for the most part, the creative efforts of Azaria, who as a Sephardic Jew grew up hearing and understanding the Judeo-Spanish spoken by his parents and grandparents (Greenberg, par. 4; Wolf, par. 9). Azaria, in fact, credits his grandmother's speech and personality as a source of inspiration for his portrayal of the Agador character (Smith).

In *The Birdcage*, the Guatemalan voice of Agador is well done and believable. Scharf, for example, claims that Azaria "steals every scene in which he appears" in the film (par. 4). Azaria was nominated for a 1997 Screen Actors Guild Award for best male supporting actor for his portrayal of Agador in this film. In *America's Sweethearts*, on the other hand, the Spanish voice of Hector is not believable but over-

exaggerated and partially inaccurate. Using as a basis of analysis the phonetic features that one might expect to find in the English of a Guatemalan or Spaniard, this article examines the features used by Azaria in the speech of Agador and Hector, respectively. Other linguistic aspects of these characters' English, such as their vocabulary and syntax, also contribute to its perception as non-native. However, the focus of the present article is simply pronunciation, as accent is the factor that best identifies a non-native speaker's origin.

Considering first *The Birdcage*, Azaria plays the secondary role of Agador, the gay Guatemalan housekeeper of a likewise gay couple, Armand (played by Robin Williams) and Albert (played by Nathan Lane). Armand owns a Miami nightclub featuring performances by men dressed in drag, and Albert performs as Starina, the star of the club. Together the couple raised Val, Armand's son. The plot of the film revolves around the ensuing visit of Val's fiancée Barbara and her mother and father, who is a right-wing conservative senator running for reelection. The gay couple, at the request of Val, agree to masquerade as straight men in order to avoid possible problems with Val's future in-laws. Agador's role in the comedy is that of facilitator of both the gay couple's everyday lives as well as this short-lived masquerade. He is nurturing, creative, easy-going, and likeable.

Agador's speech obviously contains features that one associates with gay speech, such as elongated syllables, high pitch, and exaggerated variations in intonation. However, his speech also is clearly that of a Hispanic gay man speaking non-native English as opposed to a gay man speaking native English. Various aspects of Agador's speech regarding syllable structure and individual consonants identify it as Hispanic. In regard to syllable structure, English permits consonant clusters that are more complex than those allowed by Spanish. Thus, native Spanish speakers employ various strategies in their English to

make these clusters pronounceable. Such strategies are displayed in the speech of Agador. The most common one is epenthesis, which involves the insertion of the vowel [e] before a word-initial [s] followed by a consonant. Examples of this process found in Agador's speech include the following (where a period designates a syllable boundary): [es.ta.rí.na] for Albert's stage name *Starina*, [es.tíl] for the adverb *still*, [es.tó.kiŋz] for the noun *stockings*, and [es.kréjpt] for the past participle *scraped*. Each epenthetic [e] provides the nucleus for a new syllable into which [s] can be integrated and thus separated from the following consonant. This aspect of Agador's speech contributes greatly to the perception of it as non-native and, particularly, as Hispanic.

A second strategy used by native Spanish speakers in their English to simplify complex consonant clusters is deletion. Again, various examples of this process are evidenced in Agador's speech. He pronounces the word *pretend* in utterance-final position as [pɾe.téŋ], deleting the final [d]. The sequence *seems to* is pronounced [siŋ.tu] with the deletion of [s], and the first word in *let's leave* is [lés] with the deletion of [t]. All of these consonant deletions add authenticity to Azaria's portrayal of a Hispanic character.

Turning now to the production of individual consonants, Canfield mentions a number of general tendencies found in Guatemalan Spanish that differ from other varieties of Spanish (55). The most characteristic feature is the assibilation of the trilled /r/ and tapped /r/ phonemes, found in words such as *carro* 'car' and *caro* 'expensive,' respectively. Canfield explains that a word like *ropa* 'clothes,' pronounced [ró.pa] in general Spanish, often is pronounced [řó.pa] in Guatemala, with an initial consonant sounding similar to an apicoalveolar [š]. The use of assibilated [ř] in this particular example can cause confusion with the word *sopa* 'soup,' pronounced [só.pa]. Nonetheless, the speech of Agador does not contain this particular phonetic feature of Guatemalan speech. Instead, Azaria employs the English sound [ɹ] for *r*.

Another feature of Guatemalan Spanish mentioned by Canfield is the weakening of intervocalic /y/ (55). Words like *capilla* 'chapel' and *mayo* 'May,' in general Spanish pronounced [ka.pí.ya] and [má.yo], respectively, often are pronounced [ka.pí.a] and [má.ɔ] in Guatemala. Again, the speech of Agador does not reflect a weakened /y/. Instead, /y/ is strengthened to [ý] or even [j] (e.g., as in English *joy*) in Agador's speech in all phonetic contexts. Almost every occurrence of the word *you* is realized as

[jú] or [jú], and every *yes* is [ýés] or [jés]. While this pronunciation may not reflect Guatemalan Spanish, it does represent how speakers from numerous other dialects of Spanish would pronounce these words in English. Thus, it does not detract from Azaria's representation of a general Hispanic accent.

Two final phonetic features of Guatemalan Spanish cited by Canfield do indeed appear in the speech of Agador (55). The first is the velarization of /n/ in word-final position. The norm in Spanish is for a nasal consonant in this position to have an alveolar point of articulation [n] (e.g., as in English *sin*), not a velar point of articulation [ŋ] (e.g., as in English *sing*). However, in the Spanish of Guatemala, as in the Caribbean, a velar nasal [ŋ] is common in word-final position. In the speech of Agador, the example *pretend*, realized as [pɾe.téŋ] with a deleted [d], was already given. Agador also produces the examples *man* [mán] and *time* [táŋ].

Secondly, Canfield points out that in Guatemalan Spanish, the sound [x] found in words such as *ojo* [ó.xo] 'eye' and *gira* [xí.ra] 'tour' is softened to an *h* sound [h], not present in general Spanish (55). English is the opposite of general Spanish in this respect: the [h] sound exists while the [x] sound does not. Azaria easily imitates a Guatemalan accent in English by simply using [h] accurately in words such as *here*, *how*, and *happened*, whereas a native speaker of a different Spanish dialect would produce these same examples using an initial [x] sound.

Finally, one last phonetic feature typically found in the English of a native Spanish speaker is the use of the affricate [č] (e.g., as in English *chew*) as a substitute for the fricative [š] (e.g., as in English *shoe*), since [č] exists in Spanish and [š] does not. Azaria's Agador believably employs [č] in various English words containing the [š] sound, including *combination*, which Agador pronounces [kom.bi.néj.čən], as well as *show* [čóu], *short* [čóɪt], and *shot* [čát].

In summary, while the English speech of Agador in *The Birdcage* does not reflect all of the possible phonetic features of Guatemalan Spanish, such as the assibilation of /r/ and /r/ or weakened /y/, his speech does contain other features found in this dialect, such as the velar nasal [ŋ] in word-final position and the use of [h] instead of [x]. Furthermore, Agador's speech contains various features indicative of a general Hispanic accent in English as opposed to a specifically Guatemalan one, such as the epenthesis of [e], the deletion of consonants in complex clusters, the use of [ý] or [j] in place of softer [y], and the use of [č] for [š]. All of these phonetic features contribute to the

perception of Agador's speech as non-native and make him believable as a character from the Spanish-speaking world.

Azaria's portrayal of Hector, the character from Spain in *America's Sweethearts*, is much less convincing. In this satirical romantic comedy, Hector is the boyfriend of movie star Gwen Harrison (played by Catherine Zeta-Jones), who a year earlier left her equally famous actor husband Eddie (performed by John Cusack) to be with Hector. Gwen's publicist Lee (played by Billy Crystal) recruits the help of Gwen's sister and assistant Kiki (acted by Julia Roberts) to convince the actress to reunite with her estranged husband for a press junket promoting their last film together. Numerous fiascos ensue at the junket. Essentially, *America's Sweethearts* is a satire of the inner workings of Hollywood, including both those personal and professional. Hector represents various character types, including the good-looking but untalented performer and the egocentric Latin lover, who is unfaithful yet jealous, and macho yet overly passionate.

Hector's speech in English is obviously non-native, but various inaccuracies in his pronunciation make it unconvincing and even offensive as an accent from Spain. The aspect of Peninsular Spanish that most distinguishes it from Latin American varieties of the language is the existence of two phonemes /s/ and /θ/ in the former dialect, whereas in the latter varieties only the /s/ phoneme exists to do the work of both. Thus, in Spain, the letter *c* followed by the vowels [e] or [i] and the letter *z* followed by [a], [o], or [u] are pronounced [θ] (e.g., as in English *thank*), with an interdental point of articulation. The letter *s* is always pronounced [s], with an alveolar point of articulation. In Latin America, on the other hand, the three graphemes *c*, *z*, and *s* are always pronounced [s]. So, for example, whereas the words *casa* [ká.sa] 'house' and *caza* [ká.θa] 'hunt' contrast in Spain, in the Americas they are homonyms, both pronounced [ká.sa].

In his portrayal of Hector, Azaria employs the interdental sound [θ] very frequently in his English speech to reflect a Peninsular Spanish pronunciation. However, he over extends the use of [θ] to words spelled with *s* that would never call for this pronunciation according to the rules of Peninsular Spanish, such as *sweaty* [θwé.ti], *studio* [θtú.djo], *yes* [ýéθ], *goes* [góθ], *pleased* [plíθd], and *skins* [θkínθ]. One could postulate that Hector is from southern Spain, since in the Andalusian dialect of Spanish, a small number of speakers are *ceceantes*, meaning that their phonology contains only the /θ/ phoneme to the

exclusion of the /s/ phoneme. Alternatively, one could conclude that Hector suffers from a lisp or a speech impediment. In either one of these two scenarios, however, one would not expect to hear the [s] sound in any context of the character's speech. The fact is he uses [s] various times. He says, for example, *personally* [pér.son.ə.li], *trust* [trʌst], and *embrace* [em.bréjs]. What is most absurd about Azaria's over use of [θ] is that the phonemes /θ/ and /s/ both occur in English, as demonstrated by the minimal pair *thank* [θɛŋk] and *sank* [séŋk]. Peninsular Spanish and English are identical in this regard. Generally, Peninsular Spanish speakers who also speak English are able to discern by ear when each sound is to be used in English and do so accurately. In sum, Azaria's exaggerated and inaccurate use of [θ] detracts from the authenticity of his character Hector.

A second characteristic of Peninsular Spanish that distinguishes it from Latin American Spanish is the strength of the [x] sound. In Spain, the fricative quality of [x] is greatly emphasized, whereas in the Americas, this sound tends to be softened, possibly even to the point of [h], as was seen for Guatemalan Spanish. To portray Hector as a Spaniard, Azaria accurately pronounces English words spelled with *h* with a strong velar [x], as in *he* [xí] and *here* [xír], since [h] does not occur in standard Peninsular Spanish. However, again, Azaria gets over ambitious in his imitation of this feature by applying it to words containing a [j] sound in English, such as *junket*, which he pronounces [xún.ket]. In other cases, however, the actor produces a perfectly native sounding [j]. For instance, he say *enjoy* [eñ.jóɨ] and *jump* [jʌmp]. Again, this represents an inconsistency in his foreign accent. Instead of using [x] or [j], it would have been more characteristic of a Spaniard to employ a strong [y] sound, in other words, the affricate [j̥] described in the speech of Agador. Thus, the words cited above would be pronounced [ýún.ket], [eñ.jóɨ], and [ýʌmp]. It is this Spanish [j̥] sound that most closely approximates English [j]. To his credit, Azaria's Hector does accurately employ [j̥] in other words, however, such as *you* [ýú], *yes* [ýéθ], and *you're* [ýór].

Two further phonetic aspects of Hector's speech redeem it to a small degree. First, like Agador, he produces [ç] as a substitute for [ʃ], as is typically heard in the English of a native Spanish speaker. Hector says *shit* [çít], *shower* [çáw.ər], and *machine* [ma.çín]. Second, since Spanish does not contain the labiodental fricative [v], the bilabial stop [b] is typically used in English as a substitute. In the film, Hector says *invited* [im.bájt.id], for example.

In sum, the foreign accent created by Azaria to play Hector does not accurately reflect the phonetic features one might expect to find in the English of a person from Spain. Two important identifying features of the Peninsular dialect, i.e., the distinction between [θ] and [s] and a strong [x], are over extended to contexts where they do not belong. Hector's speech does contain some characteristic features, however. These include the use of strong [ý], the use of [č] for [š], and the use of [b] for [v]. Overall, however, these correct features are overshadowed by those exaggerated in his speech, and the result is an implausible Spanish accent.

In conclusion, it has been shown in phonetic terms why Agador's accent is credible as Guatemalan and why Hector's accent is not credible as Peninsular. Agador integrates accurate features at the levels of both the segment, or individual sound, and the syllable. Hector employs partially inaccurate features at the segmental level only and ignores syllabic modifications completely. As *America's Sweethearts* is a satire of Hollywood, and Hector represents one of the character types being ridiculed, it is possible that Azaria exaggerated the [θ] and [x] sounds in his character's speech as a way to make him seem even more ridiculous. The danger in this is that Hector is the only character in the film who is not from the United States. For American viewers who have had little or no exposure to the people and cultures of Spain, this portrayal of a Spanish man and his way of speaking could be taken as accurate. In reality, it is a gross misrepresentation and stereotypes the dialect as unintelligent. As a speaker of this dialect, I actually felt offended while listening to the character, even though at times I found him humorous, as well. There is no doubt that Hank Azaria is a very talented and accomplished voice artist. His performances in *The*

*Birdcage* and *The Simpsons* demonstrate this fact. However, all great performers have their off nights, and in my opinion as a phonologist, Azaria's portrayal of Hector in *America's Sweethearts* represents just that.

### *Works Cited*

- America's Sweethearts*. Dir. Joe Roth. Perf. Julia Roberts, Billy Crystal, Catherine Zeta-Jones, and John Cusack. Revolution Studios, 2001.
- Canfield, D. Lincoln. *Spanish Pronunciation in the Americas*. Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1981.
- Greenberg, Melinda. "Finding His Own Voice: After Doing *The Simpsons* and *Herman's Head* Actor Hank Azaria Is Stepping Out with a New Robert Redford Film." *Baltimore Jewish Times* 20 May 1994. 26 September 2001 <<http://www.geocities.com/TelevisionCity/Studio/7543/azaria6.html>>.
- "His Life So Far..." 26 September 2001. <<http://www.geocities.com/TelevisionCity/Studio/7543/bio.html>>
- Scharf, Ed. "Lunchbox Heroes: Hank Azaria." *Check-Out.com* 26 September 2001 <<http://www.geocities.com/TelevisionCity/Studio/7543/lunchbox.html>>.
- Smith, Steven. "Q & A: Hank Azaria." *Los Angeles Times* 20 May 1998. 26 September 2001 <<http://www.geocities.com/TelevisionCity/Studio/7543/interview1.html>>.
- The Birdcage*. Dir. Mike Nichols. Perf. Robin Williams, Nathan Lane, Gene Hackman, and Dianne Wiest. United Artists Pictures, 1996.
- Wolf, Jeanne. "Star Talk: Hank Azaria." *TV Guide* 2 December 1999. 26 September 2001 <<http://www.geocities.com/TelevisionCity/Studio/7543/twm2.html>>.