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## John Wick and the multilingual kick

**Abstract:** Action might not be considered a genre of ‘big ideas’, but it most definitely is a genre of politics. The genre is strongly linked to the white middle-class male, and has focused on telling the tale of this masculinity, especially since its apogee in the 1980s. Border conflicts, the conquest of land or the control of the environment have been at the core of the genre since the beginning. The alien menace – as we are increasingly interested in finding life outside our planet – and the rise of new technologies that render physical strength obsolete and replace it with another set of skills that do not depend on the body itself, too, have become important sources of inspiration for action narratives. Even though the action film is not a genre of words, multilingualism is re-shaping our world, and action films have not failed in noticing that as early as the 1980s. This article explores the attempts, however shy those may be, of action cinema to incorporate and make use of multilingualism, and discusses how the use of multilingualism in the *John Wick* franchise can be understood as yet another step towards a more realistic depiction of action films’ settings within a multicultural world.

### Introduction

While concerns with ideals of masculinity have always been central to action films, at present, they show the obsolescence of the traditional, mostly physical strength-based male heroes. It was the political and social changes in the wake of WWII that led to a significant transformation of those ideals. As Anthony Clare (2000: 100) observes, “men are becoming redundant in a biological, social and economic way as the historic roles of ‘heroic masculinity,’ ‘old industrial man’ or simply ‘old man’ have been phased out by ongoing technological, social and political change since the late 1960s”. Thus, in action films, society often seems to have forgotten how pure strength has previously saved the day, and there is always a point where diplomatic means are exhausted. In this context, so the narrative goes, evil forces (earthly and alien alike) take advantage and are about to win the battle, when finally the ones on the good side realize that the use

of force is necessary. The action hero then is finally able to use his strength in order to defeat evil and save the day once more.

Increasingly international sources of danger and the ensuing international hypermobility of contemporary action films' superheroes entail not merely domestic, but also international multilingual settings. In my analysis, I concentrate on instances of multilingualism in action films, paying particular attention to the scenes in which codeswitching has a narrative function, for instance, of "disarming" the opponents or creating effects of surprise and tension. This resembles the effects of a sucker punch, or a surprise blow, and this is why I shall refer to this narrative resource as "multilingual kick". It is a concept related to that of the 'punch line', the sentence that concludes a joke and is intended to make people laugh. In the case of action films, it is not only used as a means to end a joke, but to figuratively punch the adversary in the face with one's language skills, sometimes just for fun, sometimes to perhaps surprise the counterpart and show them that you understand their language.

The use of punch lines in action films is by no means rare. In a genre where words are already scarce, and the action is all that matters, spoken dialogue often has an elevated sense of importance. Through the use of tongue-in-cheek remarks and irony, they usually serve to characterise the hero as a tough and cool person (Tasker 1993: 74 f.).

What is not so common, however, is the use of different languages in such dialogues. The action hero has always been a monolingual character, often reverting to the help of others to communicate with people who do not speak English, or making use of brute force to encourage compliance with the previously expressed English aspirations. This is a technique often used in crime fiction, where the interrogated suspect pretends for a while to not speak the desired language. Nevertheless, there are examples of multilingualism in action films, and it is becoming ever more common.

## **Multilingual punchlines and codeswitching in action cinema since 1990s**

One of the earliest examples of multilingual punchlines, and by far the most famous one, can be found in the acclaimed *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (dir. James Cameron, 1991). Along the lines of how he was taught

by John Connor, the Terminator uses the now widely popular catchphrase “Hasta la vista, baby” (02:09:56–02:10:22) as a farewell to his foe, the T-1000, prior to an (unsuccessful) attempt at eradicating the adversary. This is, however, not the only moment in the film where a sentence in another language is spoken. The young John Connor mixes expressions in French and Spanish here and there throughout the film, so as to define him as a resourceful, street wise boy who knows his way around thug-gish landscapes. The use that Connor makes of languages corresponds to the stereotypes associated with them: Mexican Spanish to show that he is street smart, and French to be cool and hip.

For example, as he gets to know the Terminator and discovers the cyborg is programmed to do his bidding, he dares to tease two common thugs who happen to walk by. As the two feel provoked and respond with insults, John answers, amused: “Did you call *moi* a ‘dipshit’?” (00:48:18). Furthermore, in order to show contempt as he throws away the last pieces of technology related to the development of the Terminators in the future, he utters: “Adiós” (02:24:05–02:24:21). In yet another multilingual moment in the film, John Connor explains to the Terminator how to use language switching in order to deliver an accurate and effective ‘verbal kick’. He tells the cyborg, for instance: “You gotta listen the way people talk”, pointing towards the fact that society itself is becoming multilingual, and it is important to be aware of this in order to be able to react in daily interactions, respond with wit and, “if you wanna shine them on, it’s ‘hasta la vista, baby’” (01:14:10–01:14:59).

Despite the success of this emblematic multilingual punchline in *Terminator 2*,<sup>1</sup> we still have to wait until the late 1990s–beginning of the 2000s in order to see films in which the heroines and heroes do speak other languages and it is shown as an advantage, be it in order to make friends with locals and/or get assistance, or to not be fooled by the ‘bad guys’, who have a long tradition within this genre of usually being foreigners. With globalisation at full throttle, the situation seems to not be changing any time soon. Action films tend to follow social trends and often present possible worst-case scenarios in which a certain phenomenon (like

1 As a side note, it is worth mentioning the Wikipedia entry about this phrase: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hasta\\_la\\_vista\\_baby](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hasta_la_vista_baby) (accessed: 08.10.2018).

pollution or desertification) has completely changed life as we know it. For instance, the poster for the fifth instalment of *Resident Evil, Retribution* (dir. Paul W.S. Anderson, 2012), captured in its “Think global. Kill local” the worries of many, making a pun on the slogan “think global, act local”, and its variation that was extensively used for various campaigns by different entities to promote sales in local stores against national or multinational competition.

Globalisation and its effects not only on climate and economy, but on work, too, is precisely what is making action heroines and heroes pull their socks up and learn languages: evil goes global, and thus they no longer deal with exclusively domestic threats. They have to be prepared to fight all over the world. Thus, already in the *Tomb Raider* franchise, we see how Lara not only can read ancient languages, but also speak modern ones, such as Khmer in *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2001) and Chinese in *The Cradle of Life* (2003). In the first film, she arrives at a harbour in Cambodia after fleeing from her enemies and asks a Buddhist monk for help in Khmer. Further on, she explains to the monk in English that her phone got wet. In the second film, *The Cradle of Life* (2003), she arrives in a remote village in China and her capacity to speak Chinese is also briefly commented on, as she arrives and is warmly welcomed by a woman who seems to be in charge (00:31:18). They hug and exchange courtesies in Chinese, and then change to English when the old woman spots Lara’s male companion.

These two examples show yet another use of multilingual skills, namely, gaining assistance from local people. By speaking their language, Lara Croft is able to gain their trust, learn from them and obtain valuable information. Thus, language skills are presented as a way to attain a deeper knowledge and understanding of the world around us. This way of using multilingualism is especially related to female characters, and it is certainly different from John Connor’s. Whereas he employs single words or short expressions only to deliver a ‘verbal kick’ to his conversational counterpart, action heroines do show command of the language at a conversational level, although sometimes just briefly. However, this apparently small detail points towards traditional gender stereotypes, according to which women are better at learning languages than men and are also more collaborative and less prone to aggression.

Of course, these are both very shy attempts at showing multilingualism, but they already set the base for a new way of understanding the use of foreign languages, not only as something that helps differentiate good from evil in the films, but as a way of being accepted and being able to get assistance all over the world. Further multilingual action heroes are Beatrix Kiddo, aka the Bride, and most of her colleagues at the Deadly Viper Assassination Squad in both *Kill Bill* volumes, where English, Japanese, and Chinese are spoken. In these two films, all characters are able to switch between languages without effort, which is presented as a basic skill for elite assassins, as they have to work in different parts of the world and communicate with the best masters of martial arts, such as Pai Mei, who also speaks other languages but demands that they speak Mandarin and Cantonese. When the Bride meets Pai Mei for the first time, he tests not only her martial arts skills but also her language skills. This scene illustrates one of the biggest issues of foreign languages: being laughed at because your accent is not good enough. This seems to be a particularly present fear in Hollywood movies, which show a long tradition of representation of characters who are not able to speak English properly as less smart. Elspaß and Maitz describe this phenomenon at a social level as *Linguizismus*:

Bestimmte Sprech- bzw. Schreibweisen werden gegenüber ihr abweichenden auf Basis sprachlicher Ideologien und Mythen zur Herstellung oder Aufrechterhaltung sozialer Strukturen abgewertet. Als Messlatte dient dabei nicht selten die sogenannte Standardsprache. (Elspaß & Maitz 2011: 8).

In the 2010s, we encounter more examples of multilingual heroines and heroes. Indeed, as Bleichenbacher observes (2007: 113), recently, non-English dialogues appear in ever more Hollywood blockbusters and their functions and meaning [although I think it is redundant] get ever more differentiated. For instance, both Marvel and DC universes, as an example of two of the most successful action franchises, feature a few characters who can speak different languages. The main example from the Marvel universe is Black Widow, a Russian spy whose language capabilities are thematised at the moment of her introduction in *Iron Man 2* (dir. Jon Favreau, 2010). While she pretends not to know how to fight in a ring with Happy Hogan (Jon Favreau), Tony Stark (Robert Downey Jr.) checks her resume and goes over the different jobs she had and skills she possesses, among which

the command of several foreign languages and even Latin is highlighted. She is thus presented as a multilingual character so as to illustrate her cunning and mental capacities. Directly after Stark finishes going through her impressive resume, she knocks Happy to the floor with a well-thrown punch, which underlines her guile and outstanding skill in all domains. However, her foreign language abilities are not exploited in any of the films. Later on, other characters with Slavic backgrounds appear, such as Wanda Maximoff/Scarlett Witch (Elizabeth Olsen) and her brother, Pietro Maximoff/Quicksilver (Aaron Taylor-Johnson) in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (dir. Joss Whedon, 2015). However, they also do not speak in their mother tongue, even though, unlike the Black Widow, they indeed have an accent when they speak in English, which underlines the fact that English is not their mother tongue.

In the DC universe, the recently premiered adaptation of *Wonder Woman* (dir. Patty Jenkins, 2017) shows Diana's ability to speak "1000 languages" in two scenes: the first one is the moment when Steve Trevor (Chris Pine) introduces Diana/Wonder Woman (Gal Gadot) to the group of men he has recruited to assist them. In that moment, Trevor introduces Sameer (Saïd Taghmaoui) as a "top undercover man", who "can talk the skin off a cabbage many ways as you can". Diana is far from impressed and a multilingual dialectical battle between Diana and Sameer begins in which she "attacks" first in Spanish and then Chinese, and Sameer responds. The final blow is delivered by Diana, when she starts talking in ancient Greek, rendering Sameer speechless. The second occasion happens during battle, as Diana wants to assist the women and children and thus needs to communicate with the local people, for which she employs Dutch.

However, none of these films integrate multilingualism in the same manner as the *John Wick* franchise (dir. Chad Stahelski, 2014 and 2017) does. Throughout both films, the protagonist, John Wick, played by Keanu Reeves, speaks English, of course, as well as Russian, Italian, and even sign language.

## Multilingual John Wick

*John Wick* (2014) and *John Wick: Chapter 2* (2017) are two action films directed by Chad Stahelski, a former stunt man and protagonist of

low-budget martial arts films. The franchise is part of a new independent action film production trend whose main characteristic is to make the best out of low budgets. In comparison to such films as the *Avengers: Era of Ultron* (dir. Joss Whedon, 2015), which had a budget of 250 million dollars, *John Wick* cost only 20 million dollars. *Atomic Blonde* (dir. David Leitch, 2017), another film that falls into this category, had a budget of only 30 million dollars. This is relevant precisely because high-budget Hollywood films are much more formulaic, whereas lower-budget features allow for more creative freedom to break stereotypes and transgress the limits of representation, be it at the aesthetic (a more graphical depiction of violence, for instance) or at the narrative level, including new takes on socio-political matters, as well as the appearance of unconventional character traits.

In chapter 1, John Wick is presented as a hitman who used to work for different mafia groups. The crime world in the film is organized around a code of honour, based on blood oaths, and it utilises a worldwide hotel chain as a setting in which the different mafias do their business. Under the cover of these hotels, it is forbidden to attack or kill other hitmen or mafia members, and in this sense, it is a place for dialogue. Although it is not common, some people try to leave this criminal underworld and start a normal life. And that is exactly what John Wick did. He fell in love with a woman and retired from his life as hitman, burying his stash of weapons and money in the basement of the house they built. As John's wife died of an incurable disease, he found himself alone. To help him cope with the loss, his wife had prepared a special posthumous present: a Beagle puppy named Daisy (her favourite flower), in order to provide him with a being to take care of and not become isolated (she knows of John's attachment to his car but in her view it is not the right object to throw affection towards).

However, tragedy strikes back: one day, while filling up his car, John is teased by a group of young Russian thugs, led by Iosef Tarasov (Alfie Allen), the son of the Russian mafia boss Viggo Tarasov (Michael Nyqvist). As the young man is used to getting anything he wants, he tries to buy John's car, not knowing who John is. When John rejects his offer, Iosef insults him in Russian and says that everything has its price, all the while keeping his tone of voice level and friendly so that John would not understand the message. To Iosef's surprise, John responds in Russian

too, and tells him that the car is not for sale in a far less friendly tone, delivering an effective multilingual kick that leaves Iosef confused for a moment, and provokes his fury later on as he realises he has been made to look like a fool.

This sequence allows us to see how John Wick employs multilingualism differently than John Connor: while the boy merely sprinkles his witty comments with foreign words in order to sound even more disdainful and make them thus more effective, Wick shows that he actually speaks the foreign language and can use it quite proficiently, as he is able to rhetorically attack even native speakers. Throughout the film, there are many occasions in which brief multilingual exchanges happen, and John makes use of his language skills in many situations to be able to spy on his enemies or deceive them. For example, having knocked out one of Viggo's security team members, he answers in Russian through the communication system so that nobody notices that he has infiltrated the area. This situation correlates with what is often seen in films such as *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*, in which the action heroine gains the trust of the local people by being able to speak their language. In Wick's scenario, however, it is not trust but subterfuge.

In contrast to other action films, in which the bad guys are only depicted as doing or at least planning to do something bad, in *John Wick*, the adversaries are also allowed to show their concerns and their problems. Thus, in the first instalment, Viggo is presented as a concerned father who is in distress due to the realisation that his son will die because he has made a very big mistake: he messed with John Wick. He will try to protect Iosef and, when he fails to do that, Viggo does his duty to avenge him. In many of the occasions in which Viggo is on screen, he speaks Russian with his men as well as with Avi (Dean Winters), his counsellor and second-in-command. Avi is a citizen of the United States and can only speak English. Viggo talks to him often in Russian, to which Avi always answers, annoyed: "Viggo, English, please". Thus, Avi presents a strong contrast to John as another man who works with a foreign mafia but does not bother to learn the language. Whereas John is cool and tough, Avi is presented as impulsive and vain, and through the just mentioned lack of foreign language skills, he comes across as less resourceful and smart. In this manner, the film launches a veiled criticism of the mindset of many people who want only

a monolingual world, even in societies such as that of the US, where many different cultures coexist.

*John Wick: Chapter 2* maintains the multilingual atmosphere, this time by John interacting with the Italian mafia. After John deals with the Russians, the fact that he made use of the resources provided by the underground society signals that he is again active in that world. This calls the attention of Santino D'Antonio (Riccardo Scamarcio), to whom John owes a debt. Santino wants John to kill his sister Gianna D'Antonio (Claudia Gerini), so that he can take control over the assets his sister lawfully inherited from their deceased father. John is forced to fulfil the job, as there is a blood debt involved, which at the same time causes him to fall in disgrace: the very same Santino automatically contracts the obligation to avenge his sister, unregretfully setting a handsome bounty on Wick's head. Then all hell breaks loose and John finds himself persecuted by hitmen of the Italian mafia and other professionals of the trade.

The exchanges in Italian are more brief than the Russian dialogues in the first instalment, but still they are present, and John is shown to also be at ease in the Italian context. However, this is not precisely what makes the second part also pertinent to my analysis. John's ability to speak Italian is again presented as crucial for his survival and excellence in his work. What also makes the second part interesting is the fact that it introduces sign language to the multilingual constellation. The top assassin working for the Italian mafia is Ares (Ruby Rose), a woman who cannot speak, and communicates only through sign language. Once more, John surprises the audience by effectively communicating with her in sign language and establishing an antagonistic relationship with her. Here again, the hero's skill is seen as an advantage and yet another proof of his superiority in comparison to ordinary citizens.

Of course, in both instalments of the film, all the verbal and non-verbal exchanges in foreign languages are subtitled. As already mentioned at the beginning, action is not really the genre for words, let alone for subtitles. However, once again, the John Wick franchise has found an original solution to traditional problems and issues that come with multilingualism in action films, namely, subtitling or explicit translation of the dialogues, to cite but two of those more frequently employed. In the film, when Viggo speaks in Russian, the explicit translation in further dialogues is completely avoided,

leaving subtitles as the only way to convey the meaning. The subtitles themselves are not of the traditional sort, but make use of fancy fonts, with different colours and sizes, illustrating intonation and intent of the speaker and imbuing the text with ‘action’ which makes the task of reading more exciting. The fact that there is no explicit translation in the film also creates a sense of complicity between the audience and Viggo, and it increases the feeling of disdain towards Avi, who does not understand a word of what Viggo says.

With the frequent code switching and the portrayal of multilingual characters as more able and cool, the film achieves a degree of “normalisation” in the sense Bleichenbacher (2007: 123) suggests as the way towards a less biased representation of multilingual characters. Even though the Russians and the Italians are still the mafia, and therefore the bad guys, the audience gains an insight into the tribulations of Viggo as a caring father in his own way and understands the personal reasons behind his actions. Thus, there is not such a big difference between John’s mercenary code and Viggo’s Russian mafia laws and sense of honour and family.

Even though the presence of multilingualism is still scarce, work is being done in order to also include it in fictional representations of the world. By doing so, the filmic tale gives recognition to the presence of multilingualism in the real world, normalises it, and imbues it with new, more positive values. Thus, in action cinema in particular, multilingualism has changed from menace, putting peace and order at risk through chaos and misunderstandings, as in the tower of Babel, to a new skill necessary to survive in a global world.

Action heroines and heroes should be superior to the average human being and excel where ordinary citizens fail, exhibiting a range of abilities that can be considered in any case as superpowers. The physical prowess and amount of damage endured by John Rambo or Mallory Kane (*Haywire*, dir. Steven Soderbergh, 2011) is superhuman at least, even if they are portrayed as earthly people. Films such as *John Wick* show that foreign language skills have a legitimate place among superpowers.

## Filmography

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