

Accents and the Supernatural: Code-switching in the TV Miniseries *The Fall of the House of Usher* (2023)

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“The Fall of the House of Usher” (2023) is an American gothic horror drama TV miniseries about a wealthy family haunted by a mysterious stranger called Verna, a shape-shifter who assumes a different identity before meeting each of the Usher heirs prior to their deaths. Verna not only alters her physical appearance, but she also puts on various accents, which ultimately adds richness to her transformations. This paper will examine closely an important scene from Episode 5 where Verna, who has assumed the identity of a patient named Pamela Clemm, is speaking with Victorine LaFourcade, a researcher and one of Roderick Usher’s illegitimate children. My aim is to see why Verna code-switches from the accent that she is using as Pamela Clemm to the accent that she normally speaks with whenever she is not in disguise.

Keywords: *code-switching, accents, The Fall of the House of Usher (2023), Verna*

1. Introduction

There is a wide range of horror movies and TV shows. But the success they enjoy can be achieved in different ways such as through visual effects, jump scares and sinister music (El-Sayed 2021, 225). And yet, according to the same author (El-Sayed 2021, 225), there is another element whose impact should not be underestimated, and that is language. Language is a powerful tool whose applications are wide and diverse. Unsurprisingly, through language we can impart information and express our feelings (Holmes 2013). We can also use it to convey different parts of our identity (Blommaert 2005; Holmes 2013). But the connection between language and identity is stronger than we might think (Pennycook 2004). In the words of Cameron (1997, 49), “whereas sociolinguistics traditionally assumes that people talk the way they do because of who they (already) are, the postmodernist approach suggests that people are who they are because of (among other things) the way they talk”. This outlines a less conventional view of

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sociolinguistics, more precisely, that language plays an active role in constructing our identity (Cameron 1997, 49). With this in mind, it would be interesting to see how the use of language or rather accents is applied in TV series. Therefore, the present article will be taking a closer look at the importance of accent use in the American gothic horror drama TV miniseries *The Fall of the House of Usher* (2023), in the case of the character Verna, who uses different accents when speaking to each of the Usher heirs prior to their deaths, but seems to speak with one particular accent whenever she is not in disguise.

The paper includes a presentation of the concept of code-switching, and a short summary of the TV series under discussion, with a focus on Verna and her alter ego Pamela Clemm. Then, it provides a brief overview of the main differences between General American and Southern American English accents, followed by the analysis of Episode 5 of the series, and the concluding remarks.

2. Code-switching

There are two important terms which need to be discussed before delving into the analytical part of this article, namely 'code' and 'code-switching'. Firstly, the term 'code' or, as it is more widely known as 'variety' is used "to refer to any set of linguistic forms which patterns according to social factors" (Holmes 2013, 6). In other words, people's linguistic choices are heavily impacted by the social context (Holmes 2013, 6). We could also assume that 'code' incorporates a wide variety of accents and dialects as well as different linguistic styles and languages which stand in contrast with each other for different social reasons (Holmes 2013, 6).

In this train of thought, the term 'code-switching', according to Gardner-Chloros (2009, 4), is the act of using various languages or dialects in a communicative situation. Similarly, 'code-switching' has been defined as "switching from one language variety to another when the situation demands [...]" (Trudgill 2000, 201-202). This seems to provide a broader definition, since, as discussed earlier, the term 'variety' includes an extensive array of accents and linguistic styles in addition to languages and dialects (Holmes 2013, 6). Pursuing this further, the motivations for code-switching can be different (Baker 2000, as cited in Pluszczyk 2023, 439). Speakers may code-switch if a new participant joins the communicative situation (Saville-Troike 2003; Holmes 2013). Likewise, a switch may be brought about by a change of topic (Saville-Troike 2003). For instance, two Chinese students studying in an English-speaking country may code-switch from their first language into English in order to discuss their studies (Holmes 2013). In light of this, according to Bleichenbacher (2008, 13), the switch from one code to another which

is guided by non-linguistic factors like the ones above is an example of 'situational code-switching'.

Its counterpart, namely 'metaphorical code-switching', on the other hand, "adds meaning to such components as the role-relationships which are being expressed" (Saville-Troike 2003, 49). By way of illustration, let us take a look at an example described by Romaine (2000, 60). Two siblings, more precisely, a brother and a sister are having a conversation in the brother's store (Romaine 2000, 60). Both participants are used to communicating as family members rather than as store owner and customer (Romaine 2000, 60). Once the initial greetings are over, the sister wants to ask her brother for products on the basis of their shared family ties, and so chooses to use their first language, namely Lwidakho (Romaine 2000, 60). Conversely, the brother wants to treat his sister as a customer and therefore switches to Swahili, which is the neutral code choice in the siblings' speech community and the unmarked code choice for communicative situations like this (Romaine 2000, 60). Thus, the switch from Lwidakho to Swahili on the brother's part outlines his intention to present himself in a different light, more precisely, as a store owner and a salesperson (Romaine 2000, 60).

3. *The Fall of the House of Usher* (2023): Summary

The Fall of the House of Usher (2023) is an American gothic horror drama TV miniseries created by Mike Flanagan. The series boasts an impressive cast with Carla Gugino playing the mysterious Verna and T'Nia Miller who portrays one of the Usher heirs, namely Victorine LaFourcade. Other actors include Bruce Greenwood in the role of Roderick Usher and Mary McDonnell as Madeline Usher. The series is based on Edgar Allan Poe's 1840 short story of the same name, and it also makes references to a number of his other works. In fact, each episode is named after a story by Edgar Allan Poe with the exception of the first and last episodes. The series is about Roderick Usher, the CEO of Fortunato Pharmaceuticals, and his sister Madeline Usher, the company's COO, and the events which lead to their deaths as well as the deaths of their heirs.

3.1. *The Fall of the House of Usher* (2023): Verna

An essential part of the TV show is Verna, a supernatural mystical entity who possesses a wide range of powers such as shape-shifting and teleportation. Years back, Verna made a deal with Roderick and Madeline promising them power and wealth but at the cost of their lives and the lives of their heirs. In the course of the

story, it becomes clear that Verna has been making similar deals over the years with other influential and powerful people, which reinforces her ability to impact the future. However, despite her awe-inspiring persona and skills, her appearance does not seem to accentuate this. As Carla Gugino explained in an interview with *In Creative Company*, Verna needed to be “hiding in plain sight” (Gugino 2024, 1:28). This, in turn, makes her more approachable and less intimidating to the Ushers and by extension, the viewers. Since she is a shape-shifter, Verna adopts a different identity before meeting each of the Usher heirs. Her transformations are subsequently enriched by the different accents she uses. One of the accents that stands out appears to be General American, which she seems to use whenever she is commenting on the characters’ personality traits and their life choices.

3.1.1. *The Fall of the House of Usher* (2023): Pamela Clemm

In Episode 3 “Murder in the Rue Morgue”, Verna assumes the identity of Pamela Clemm, a patient with heart issues. Verna’s transformation is further aided by the use of a Southern American accent. Choosing to adopt the identity of a person with a heart condition who portrays herself as fragile, timid and uncertain of what to do is the most optimal way for Verna to get closer to Victorine LaFourcade, who is one of Roderick Usher’s illegitimate children. Victorine may be a medical professional, but her motives are far from selfless and altruistic. In fact, because of her ambitions, she turns a blind eye to the rules of ethics. Victorine sees in Pamela the perfect choice for her premature heart device’s human trials. She appears to also adopt the role of counselor and eventually persuades Pamela to undergo heart surgery during which the latter could get the heart device inserted into her chest. In contrast to Pamela’s timidity and nervousness, Victorine appears calm, level-headed and confident in her convictions, at least in the beginning.

4. General American English and Southern American English: Breakdown

As was noted previously, Verna puts on distinctive accents throughout her transformations. There are two accents which are of particular importance for this paper, more precisely, General American English and Southern American English.

The most salient features of the former accent are ‘rhoticity’, ‘t-flapping’ and ‘vowel sounds’ (Shu and Liu 2019; Simpson 2024). General American is a rhotic accent which means that the /r/ sound in words such as ‘car’ and ‘smart’ is clearly pronounced regardless of its position in a word (Simpson 2024; Shu and Liu 2019). ‘T-flapping’ refers to the quick tap of the tongue that speakers make, thus resulting

in a sound that resembles a soft 'D' (Simpson, 2024). Conversely, the Southern American accent is predominantly characterized by 'monophthongization' and "'G"-dropping' (Renwick n.d.). Monophthongization can be seen in words like "five" whereby the /i/ sound would be pronounced as an elongated /ah/ sound (Renwick n.d.). Likewise, we can notice "G"-dropping in words such as 'going' and 'moving' in which the *-ing* suffix is generally shortened to '-in' (Renwick n.d.).

5. Episode 5 "The Tell-Tale Heart": Plot

At the beginning of this episode, there is a heated argument between Victorine LaFourcade and her partner, Dr. Alessandra Ruiz. Alessandra realizes that Victorine has booked her for surgery even though their heart device is not ready for human trials. The argument quickly escalates and ends with Victorine throwing a bookend at Alessandra and ultimately killing her, a fact which is established towards the end of the episode. Shockingly, Victorine seems to have forgotten what she did, since the next time we see her she keeps trying to get in contact with Alessandra in order to apologize and work their problems out. Victorine is also desperate for her partner to agree to do Pamela's surgery. Eventually, she begins to hear a bizarre chirping sound which no one else seems to be able to hear. Victorine becomes obsessed with the sound and tries to locate it, but her efforts are in vain. At the end of the episode, it is revealed that the chirping sound comes from the heart device which Victorine attached to Alessandra's heart after she died.

In the scene below, Victorine is in her office with Verna, disguised as Pamela, and wants to convince her to undergo the surgery. Throughout their conversation, Victorine keeps hearing the strange chirping sound that has been haunting her the entire day. As can be seen from the scene, she does not seem to hear or focus on anything other than the sound itself.

The lines that are of particular importance to the analysis have been underlined.

1. **Pamela Clemm:** It's not that I don't want to be an important person. I mean, who doesn't? I just...
[chirping]
2. **Pamela Clemm:** It's about being the first. That's where I get scared. Just because it's all happening so fast. I suppose I'd feel better as well if I could talk to Dr. Ruiz.
[chirping continues]
3. **Victorine LaFourcade:** I'm sorry?

4. **Pamela Clemm:** What's more important to you... being famous or saving lives? You've always dreamed about one of those. Not so much the other. Ever think the balance was off in that equation? As a scientist, I mean.
[chirping]
5. **Victorine LaFourcade:** Excuse me?
6. **Pamela Clemm:** Dr. Ruiz, she's supposed to be performing my surgery and I haven't gotten to talk to her yet. I'd kind of like to hear what she has to say about it. [...]
[chirping]
7. **Pamela Clemm:** Do you know the term "operant conditioning"? It's what a horse has that lets them know a rider might be nervous or hesitant. They read erratic behavior. Not fear, not exactly. But animals learn real quick to avoid that person. That's you. In a nutshell. You're so out of touch with your human side... you can't even listen to anything outside your own head.
[chirping]
8. **Victorine LaFourcade:** You really don't hear that?
9. **Pamela Clemm:** Do have Dr. Ruiz give me a call. And if she says I should do this, I'll do it. No questions asked.
(Flanagan, Gilroy, Flanagan, Flanagan, and Parker 2023, 35:18)

5.1. Episode 5 "The Tell-Tale Heart": Analysis

This is the last interaction between Victorine and Verna, and it underlines several important points. At the beginning of this exchange, Verna, disguised as Pamela Clemm, speaks with a Southern American accent, but in line 4 viewers begin to witness her linguistic metamorphosis. It is important to note that a code-switch of this type has not happened before, since Verna's alter ego uses her Southern accent throughout her interactions with Victorine. This particular instance of code-switching in line 4 is made even more conspicuous by the fact that Verna remains Pamela Clemm on the outside, while at the onset of their exchange she is Pamela both physically and linguistically. It should be noted that the code-switch seems to take place when Verna confronts Victorine with a direct question which is subsequently followed by a frank observation: "What's more important to you... being famous or saving lives? You've always dreamed about one of those. Not so much the other. Ever think the balance was off in that equation? As a scientist, I mean." (line 4). For a brief moment, Victorine is caught off guard, but when she responds in line 5, Verna has already seamlessly code-switched back into her

Southern American accent, making it look as if the brief linguistic change never actually happened.

The second and final time Verna code-switches into her General American accent is when Victorine stands up from her chair and starts rummaging through her books in order to locate the haunting chirping sound that does not give her a moment's peace. While this is taking place, viewers are treated to another code-switch into General American in line 7 in which Verna makes a second and this time more detailed observation about Victorine's personality and character traits: "Do you know the term "operant conditioning"? It's what a horse has that lets them know a rider might be nervous or hesitant. They read erratic behavior. Not fear, not exactly. But animals learn real quick to avoid that person. That's you. In a nutshell. You're so out of touch with your human side... you can't even listen to anything outside your own head." (line 7). The question which needs to be addressed is what this code-switching from Southern American English to General American English means. It would seem that there are two possible explanations, but before we delve into each one, there are several points which need to be taken into consideration. Note how the beginning of this exchange focuses on Pamela's fears and how they would be put to rest if she could discuss her upcoming surgery with Dr. Ruiz. However, in line 4, the topic begins to shift and the focus now is Victorine and what matters to her in the long run. Interestingly, line 4 is also where viewers witness the first code-switch from Southern American English to General American English. We could, therefore, classify this as an instance of 'situational code-switching', since there is a change of topic.

However, even though this is a strong possibility, I believe that the motivation for the code-switch is more complex than an external factor such as a change from one topic to another. It could be assumed that the reason is connected with Victorine, Verna and her alter ego Pamela, so I will explore their characters a little further. As a researcher and a scientist, Victorine is expected to make close and detailed observations in her chosen field. In addition, at the beginning of her interactions with Pamela, she presents herself as calm and level-headed, while Pamela is timid, frightened and in need of reassurance and assistance. In contrast to her alter ego, however, Verna is a shape-shifting entity with powers beyond human comprehension, who has to exert the effects of a deal that has been made. What is more, despite altering her physical appearance and code-switching into different varieties of English, she seems to always return to her General American accent whenever she comments on the Ushers' character traits, the choices they have made in life and their lack of morality and ethics. As evidenced by the exchange above, Victorine is no exception. Note that the code-switch takes place when Verna makes her observation about the scientist's moral

degradation and her eagerness to put her own success and popularity before other people's well-being. We should recall that prior to this scene and at the beginning of the episode, Victorine throws a bookend at her partner, Dr. Alessandra Ruiz, which ultimately kills her. Victorine refuses to accept her death and horrifyingly, she cuts her open and places the device on her own partner's heart. It becomes evident that Victorine's thirst for success has incontrovertibly blinded her to the rules of ethics that she is supposed to be bound to, and Verna knows that. Curiously, during her interview with *In Creative Company*, Carla Gugino describes her character as "the engaged witness, [...] the other player theoretically running the scene, but watching these characters and actors" (Gugino 2024, 6:07). Verna is, therefore, constantly observing and taking note of the people around her, their strengths, but also their weaknesses (Gugino 2024, 6:07).

In view of all this, I would say that the switch from Southern American English to General American English signals not only a switch from one persona to another, more precisely, from Pamela to Verna, but also a role reversal. As noted earlier, although Victorine is a researcher who is expected to observe and reflect on her observations, in lines 4 and 7, it is actually Verna who does this by taking note of Victorine's character and remarking on it. It could even be suggested that the former also establishes a diagnosis in line 7 with this comment: "You're so out of touch with your human side... you can't even listen to anything outside your own head." (line 7). Therefore, I believe that the switch from Southern American English into General American English could be seen as an example of 'metaphorical code-switching' because of the role reversal which takes place between the characters. Victorine is no longer the scientist whose role it is to observe and reflect. Similarly, Pamela may have retained her physical appearance, but the switch to General American English demonstrates that it is Verna who is now standing before Victorine. She is now the observer who comments on Victorine's loss of morality. What is more, Victorine does not seem to notice Verna's code-switching or remarks, as can be seen in line 8. This, in turn, reinforces the latter's observations.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, the scene selected for this particular paper opens up the opportunity to delve deeper into the role of code-switching in the TV series *The Fall of The House of Usher* (2023), and the analysis reinforces the impact thereof.

In order to complete her transformations, Verna not only changes her physical appearance, but she also adopts a different linguistic style for each transformation. By contrast, she seems to retain her General American accent

whenever she remarks on the Ushers' character traits and the choices they have made in life. Before meeting Victorine LaFourcade, Verna assumes the identity of Pamela Clemm, a woman with heart problems who comes across as scared, timid and in need of assistance. Verna's transformation is enhanced with the addition of a Southern American accent. Disguised as Pamela Clemm, she uses a Southern American accent at the beginning of her conversation with Victorine. Her alter ego expresses doubts about the upcoming heart surgery and would like to discuss it with Dr. Alessandra Ruiz, but Victorine is too preoccupied with the chirping sound to pay attention to anything else. It is at this moment that we witness the first switch from Southern American English into General American English during which Verna confronts Victorine with a question about her priorities in life. The question is subsequently followed by a frank observation on the scientist's ambitions. The second time we witness another code-switch of this type is when Verna makes an even closer observation on Victorine's character traits and her lack of morality.

Based on the findings of this analysis, I believe that the code-switch from Southern American English into General American English could be seen as an example of 'metaphorical code-switching'. In addition to a switch from one persona to another, namely from Pamela into Verna, there seems to also be a role reversal. Obsessed by the haunting chirping sound and blinded by her selfishness and career ambitions, Victorine is no longer the scientist who is supposed to observe and remark. It is now Verna who does that by taking note and commenting on Victorine's lack of values.

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