

THERE IS MORE TO BEING A SCOTSMAN THAN PUTTING ON A KILT AND TRILLING YOUR /r/s. A STUDY OF LINGUISTIC CREDIBILITY IN THE HOLLYWOOD MOVIE *BRAVEHEART*

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1. Introduction

There seems to be a trend of caring for linguistic credibility in Hollywood. The World War II films that have been produced in the last decade or two include Germans speaking their native tongue. More impressively, in the 2004 film *Passion of the Christ*, not a word of English was spoken, making talk show host David Letterman compare it to a cab ride to a NYC airport. Such linguistic bigotry aside, it is gratifying to note that an effort is made to introduce linguistic variety even into commercial moviemaking, and one can only hope that this trend continues, thus giving the American audience much-needed exposure to other languages, and giving the rest of the world less reason for complaining about English influence on smaller languages. The question is, however, how sincere Hollywood is in its intentions and how deep its effort goes when it comes to promoting language variation and establishing linguistic credibility in its movies. In this article, an investigation of the film *Braveheart* from 1995 is carried out. The overall language situation in the film will be described and an analysis of the accent of the main character, the Scottish rebel leader William Wallace, played by Mel Gibson, will be made, with particular focus on the Scottish Vowel Length Rule (SVLR). The goal is to get an indication of the extent to which efforts have been made to create linguistic credibility.

2. The historic and linguistic context of *Braveheart*

The plot of the film *Braveheart* is based on the true story of William Wallace, a Scottish freedom fighter, rebel or terrorist, depending on your point of view, in late 13th century Scotland. Alongside Robert de Bruce (who is rather unflatteringly depicted as a wavering politician in the film), he led a rebellion against Edward I ‘Longshanks’ of England, to restore Scottish independence. He was executed before independence was won.

The language situation for the relevant people in Scotland at this period would have been more or less the following (based on Wells 1982: 393-395). The commoners would have spoken Gaelic, the court at Edinburgh, of which Robert de Bruce was the head, would have spoken an early variant of Scots. The British nobles would have been Anglo-French, and would have conversed with each other and the Scottish nobles in French. The same language would have been used at the English court. It is uncertain what language variety would have been William Wallace’s mother tongue. In the film, he is referred to as a commoner, and would thus have been speaking Gaelic. However, after the English had slain his father when William was very young, he was brought up by a wealthy uncle, who took him on the grand tour of Europe and taught him many languages. Clearly, this would hardly have been the case if he was just a commoner. Not much is known about the real William Wallace, so instead of getting lost in endless speculation here, the same assumptions will be made here as in the production of the film, and we will settle for his being of relatively humble origins and speaking Gaelic. It should be noted that Standard Scottish English (SSE) could not be heard in Scotland before the 19th century.

The producers of the film (of which Gibson is one, albeit not an executive) clearly made the decision that the original linguistic context would not aid the financial success of the film. Consequently, the linguistic context of the film was transposed to a simplified version of the language situation of the Great Britain of today. Thus, only one phrase was uttered in Gaelic in the film, the chanting of what sounds like “Mac Yolech” to celebrate that William Wallace was indeed his heroic father’s son. All Scotsmen in the film, nobles and commoners alike, speak SSE. Rather paradoxically, the only attempt at sociolinguistic variation has been made in the sociolects of the English. The king and the despised English nobles all speak with an RP accent, whereas the vile common soldiers speak Estuary English. Evidently, the producers must have thought that advantages of intelligibility outweighed the lack of credibility caused by this strategy. It is only proper to add at this point, that when Gibson finally got to finance, write and produce a film by himself, he took the ‘narrow path’ of linguistic credibility. In *Passion of the Christ*, 2004, not a word of English was spoken. Instead, Aramaic, Latin and Hebrew were used. It is

interesting to note that this has not prevented *Passion of the Christ* from becoming a highly successful, albeit controversial film. The same is true for Gibson's 2007 movie *Apocalypto*, which was all in Maya.

3. Design of the present study

The aim of this article is to get an indication of the lengths Hollywood are prepared to go in order to establish linguistic credibility. The notion of linguistic credibility can be used to mean slightly different things in different contexts. In the present article, it is meant simply as characters in a film being credible in their language use. This is particularly important when it comes to the portrayal of people who speak languages other than English, and varieties of English other than General American. A typical example of a half-hearted attempt at linguistic credibility is Germans speaking English with a German accent in *Hogan's Heroes* (1965-1971), whereas the usage of Lakota alongside English in *Dances with Wolves* (1990) is an example of an attempt at greater linguistic credibility. It could easily be established that the producers of the film *Braveheart* have not bothered to create credibility 'in the big picture', as they have created a context in which most characters speak modern SSE (and the film was largely shot in Ireland (www.imdb.com)). For a further discussion of this, see Section 2, above. Given this artificial context, the question of linguistic credibility can be raised anew. Most supporting actors in the film are native speakers of the accent they represent. Mel Gibson plays the part of the Scottish rebel leader William Wallace, and his accent is clearly supposed to be modern SSE. However, Gibson is not a native speaker of SSE (nor would William Wallace be one, but that is beside the point here). Gibson was born in 1956 in Peekskill, New York, USA, and even though Australia was his home for most of his early life (www.imdb.com), his accent can be described as General American (GA).

This analysis investigates Gibson's attempts at producing an SSE accent as part of his character in the film *Braveheart*. Even though most language traits will be surveyed, the focus will be on Gibson's success in adhering to the Scottish Vowel Length Rule (SVLR), as this would be one of the more difficult features of SSE for a non-native speaker to acquire. The SVLR will be further discussed in section 3.1, below. The tools that will be used for the analysis of the vowels are J.C. Wells's standard lexical sets (1982: 127-168), which are very useful for describing differences in vowel pronunciation. The sets "enable one to refer concisely to large groups of words which share the same vowel, and to the vowel which they share" (Wells 1982: xviii). The vowel (and/or diphthong) in each set is represented by a prototypical keyword (in capitals) that includes the vowel in question, such as GOOSE or PRICE.

In order to carry out this investigation, three films were examined. The first was *Ransom*, 1996, starring Mel Gibson. In this film, Gibson uses his own accent, and as it is contemporary to *Braveheart*, it gives good insights into Gibson's own GA idiolect. The second film was *Trainspotting*, 1996, which gives a fine overview of various genuine SSE accents of the time. The third film was of course *Braveheart* itself. The film was scrutinized and Gibson's accent was analyzed with particular focus on the SVLR. The results of the analysis are found in section 4 below.

3.1. The Scottish Vowel Length Rule (SVLR)

There has been a great deal of controversy about the SVLR, or 'Aitken's Law' as it is sometimes called after the man who 'discovered' it. It will however be referred to as SVLR here, to avoid any colonialist connotations. This is also the name Aitken himself gave the rule. According to most textbooks (e.g. Trudgill & Hannah 1982: 96 or Wells 1982: 400), which deal with SSE, the rule is as follows:

"All Scottish vowels are short, but they all (except for the BIT and BUT vowels) become long before voiced fricatives, /r/ and morpheme boundaries".

This simple description harks back to Aitken's own first description of the rule in the early seventies, which he later summarized (Aitken 1981). According to Aitken (1981: 154), the SVLR developed when vowels started to become uniformly short in duration in Scots, presumably after the Great Vowel Shift (i.e. post-15th century),

but this tendency to shortening was resisted in certain 'naturally long' environments, namely before the following: /v, ð, z, ʒ, r, #/ [...] in these environments [...], the vowels in question continued to be realized fully long, and SVLR was set up. One by one the remaining sets of vowels conformed to the new pattern of vowel duration thus established.

The reference to 'naturally long' environments no doubt has to do with the fact that vowel duration is longer before voiced consonants.

It is of course possible to describe the phenomenon from different angles, and say that instead of lengthening, vowels shorten everywhere, except in the environments mentioned above, but that does not entail any controversy. For instance, Lass described the vowels as shortening in (1976:54), but described them as lengthening in (1984:32). Controversies arise when more in-depth studies are made, but the more nuanced picture that then emerges seldom affects the environments that trigger SVLR, apart from the fact that the morpheme boundary (#) is sometimes described as word boundary, and that suffixation does not effect vowel length (Trudgill & Hannah 1982:96). Instead, the controversies concern what input vowels are affected by the SVLR. Instead of claiming this to be a general rule, affecting almost all vowels, it is claimed by Lass (1976: 54) that the phonemes

affected are the long vowels and diphthongs, and by Giegerich (1992: 230), that the tense vowels and /ai/ are affected. Perhaps most radically Scobbie et al (1999: 244) state that “morphologically conditioned quasi-phonemic contrasts in duration have been observed for the high bimoraic vowels /i/ and /u/ and the diphthong /ai/”, and consequently go on to conclude that the “morphological pattern of the SVLR affects only /i/, /u/ and /ai/”. It has been observed by most writers on the subject that the SVLR only affects the quantity and not the quality of the affected vowels, except when it comes to the diphthong /ai/. McMahon puts it like this: “For the majority of vowels affected, SVLR simply controls an alternation of length, but for the diphthong /ai/, there is a concomitant change of quality with [ai] in short and [a:i] in long environments.” (2000: 150).

There are further matters complicating the application of the SVLR, one being that it appears that the extent to which it is in operation differs depending on dialect. The speech situation in Scotland, with Scots on the one hand and SSE on the other, is highly complex, giving rise to differences in the influence exerted by SVLR. Also, the Scottish language situation is not a neat binary opposition. Scobbie has the following to say about a proposed scale of the influence of SVLR ranging from Scots to SSE: “Unfortunately, these end-points are rather nebulous. Scots comprises a range of dialects, and SSE encompasses a range of accents” (1999: 232). Other factors which are relevant for the influence of the SVLR are social class, age and education of speaker, the speech situation, and idiosyncrasies: “Each speaker might determine their own contrasts and inventory, in a statistical, gradient, nondeterministic way” (Scobbie 2002: 5).

It is not in the scope (nor in the power) of this article to solve the controversies about which input vowels are affected by the SVLR, or whether the rule even exists in its own right or should be viewed as a conjunction of several independent rules. Instead, the goal is to ascertain to what degree a non-native speaker of SSE can acquire it temporarily. In order to facilitate this, the decision has been made to follow the line of Scobbie et al (1999), and only regard the extent to which Gibson’s production of the phonemes /i/, /u/ and /ai/ follows the SVLR. A particular focus has been put on how well he has been able to manage the difference in quality of /ai/ in the various environments.

There are several difficulties involved in this. One is that vowel length is not only affected by phonemic rules such as the SVLR, but also by prosodic factors, such as sentence stress, contrastive stress and reduction. Another difficulty is that ‘sloppiness’ of everyday speech would make Gibson liable to variation in language use in a casual speech situation. This is probably not too problematic here, as there would have been a re-take (at least of the voice soundtrack), if Gibson pronounced something too sloppy or incorrectly. A third difficulty is that phonetic investigations

carried out by ear are always somewhat unreliable and subjective, especially in the present study, as the author is not a native speaker of SSE (nor of any E for that matter). These combined difficulties have led to an approach where Gibson has been given the benefit of the doubt whenever there were uncertainties about his speech, and only clear cases of pronunciation and mispronunciation will be discussed below.

4. Analysis

In this section, the results of our assesment of Gibson's attempts at SSE will be presented. In the literature, SSE is normally contrasted with RP, as this is generally considered to be the reference accent in the U.K. In this analysis, however, SSE will not be contrasted with RP, but with GA, for the rather obvious reason that this is Gibson's reference accent. The analysis will be based on word-level or segment-level pronunciation whenever possible, and will mostly focus on phonemes where SSE and GA differ, in order to ascertain whether Gibson has managed to leave his own idiolect and use a proper SSE accent. However, the analysis will also take hypercorrection into account.

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A note on notation. Examples from *Braveheart* will be presented in standard spelling with a few exceptions. The word that is supposed to illustrate the phoneme in question will be marked in *italics*. Long vowels will be marked by a colon (:), when relevant, and the absence of a colon will signal a short vowel. The figures given underneath each example locate the example in the film, by displaying hours, minutes and seconds.

4.1. Consonants

The consonant phonemes that are relevant in this study are the voiceless /w/ i.e. /m/, the 'dark' /l/ i.e. /ɫ/ and the trilled /r/. These consonants are relevant because they have a different distribution in GA as compared to SSE. The 'Scottish phoneme' /x/ as in *Loch*, is rare in SSE, except in loan words from Scots, and there was only one example of it in the film, and Gibson seemed to be able to produce it well, though the word he produced it in, the proper name *Lochlan*, was not emphasized, making it hard to judge the quality accurately.

SSE realization also tends to mean pronouncing middle or final /t/ as a glottal stop. Gibson turned out to be very good at this, which is interesting, as his GA does not include this sound.

4.1.1. The voiceless /w/

Some Americans use this phoneme (voiceless labial-velar fricative) in the appropriate contexts, roughly in words where the spelling suggests it. This is not true of Gibson, though, whose idiolect is more mainstream and he does not normally aspirate his /w/. SSE, however calls for aspiration of /w/ in these contexts, and Gibson seems to be able to deliver a /w/, whenever necessary, such as in example (1):

- (1) *What* would you do without freedom?
(*Braveheart* 1:14:52)

4.1.2. The dark /l/

This allophone of /l/ is rare in morpheme-initial position in GA and only used in morpheme-final position in RP, but quite common in SSE. Trudgill & Hannah claim that “/l/ may be dark in all positions” (1982: 96) in SSE. Again it is not something that Gibson seems to have any trouble producing. If anything, there is a slight risk of his overproducing it in a hypercorrective way, as he has a very dark /l/ in the following example:

- (2) Would you *like* to see him crush me *like* a worm?
(*Braveheart* 0:23:20)

4.1.3. The trilled /r/

This is perhaps the most stereotypical of all features of SSE; it is certainly the feature that is most often noticed by would-be imitators of SSE. In reality, most SSE speakers have a ‘flapped’ /r/ or a frictionless continuant as their realization of the /r/-phoneme (Trudgill & Hannah 1982: 96). Nevertheless, the most ‘Scottish’ /r/ sound is the trilled one, and Gibson does not seem to be able to resist using the trill, even when it is not appropriate. He often has the flapped variant, when speaking rapidly, but it is safe to say that he uses the trill to a hypercorrect degree, particularly in dramatically emphasized utterances, such as (3):

- (3) *Ride!*
(*Braveheart* 1:22:11)

4.2. Vowels

In this section, the main part of the analysis will be displayed, starting with the SVLR and then touching upon a few more observations on vowel quality.

4.2.1. SVLR

Following Scobbie et al (1999), this analysis will assume that only /i/, /u/ and /ai/ will be affected by the SVLR. The analysis will thus focus on how well Gibson has been able to produce these vowels with the correct duration in the appropriate environments, and also if he has been able to produce the correct vowel quality of /ai/. All other differences in vowel duration have been regarded as having prosodic origins and thus to be irrelevant to the present study.

4.2.1.1. GOOSE

This seems to be the vowel with which Gibson seems to have had the most success when it comes to following the SVLR. It is a very common vowel in the film, as it is the vowel of *you*, and personal pronouns are very common in dialogues, of which most of the screenplay consists. It could be argued that he does not produce the appropriate duration difference in sentences such as (4):

(4) *Could you* crush a man with that throw?
(*Braveheart* 0: 23:01)

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In (4) the SVLR ‘prescribes’ that the first word should have a short vowel and the second a long one. Gibson has the same vowel length (short) in both these words, and thus does not follow the SVLR. However, a comparison with *Trainspotting* shows that it is not very likely that a native speaker of SSE would have any real duration difference in this environment, as *you* is reduced. This is often the case with this word. However, when *you* is not reduced, Gibson produces a long version, as in (5)

(5) *You*: win.
(*Braveheart* 0:21:44)

This does not come as a surprise, though, as the vowel would also have been long in GA. On the whole, Gibson seems to be aware of the SVLR effect on /u/ in isolated words, but when he delivers longer stretches of speech, he seems to forget it. This is the case in (6), where he comments on the exaggerated rumours about his persona:

(6) Yes, I've heard. He kills men by the hundreds, and if he were here he'd *consume* the English with fireballs from his eyes and bolts of lightning from his arse.
(*Braveheart* 1:14:15)

The word *consume* in (6) is quite clearly pronounced with a long /u/, and according to the SVLR, it should not have been. It should be pointed out that this is more of an exception and that, as a rule, he gets this phoneme right.

4.2.1.2. FLEECE

Gibson has more difficulty in producing this vowel in accordance with the SVLR. His problem, not surprisingly, lies in getting the vowel short in the environments where his GA would require a long realization. I think that the secret for a successful rendering of SVLR is remembering when to make the vowels short, rather than remembering when to make them long. He often gets it right, as in (7) and (8):

(7) I will invade England and *defeat* the English on their own ground.
(*Braveheart* 1:31:34)

(8) *Meet me*: at the grove.
(*Braveheart* 0: 41:36)

(8) is most impressive, and proves that he has been made aware of the SVLR, as it would be very natural, perhaps even forgivable, to produce the two words with the same vowel duration. He is not very consistent though. This becomes apparent when one compares the two occasions of his production of the word *meet*. In (8) above, he made it short in accordance with the SVLR, but in (9) below, he did not achieve this:

(9) Take out their archers, and I'll *meet* you in the middle.
(*Braveheart* 1: 18: 53)

To sum up, he does not succeed as well with the duration of this vowel as with /u/.

4.2.1.3. PRICE

This diphthong is the phoneme which is most affected by the SVLR, as it does not only alter its quantity, but also its quality. In the 'short' environments of the SVLR, the first component is more central (very central if the speaker is working class) than in the long version, and the first component is also significantly longer and more stable in the long version (see e.g. Sundkvist 2004: 321ff for a further discussion and illustration of this phenomenon). It is clear that Gibson has been made aware of this difference (no doubt by dialect coach Julia Wilson Dixon), but he is not very successful in producing it. On most occasions, he produces the long variant, both quantitatively and qualitatively, resulting in utterances like (10).

(10) She was *my wife*.
(*Braveheart* 1: 14: 57)

There seems to be some lexical pattern to his realization. Two very common words in the film (which is, after all, a medieval war movie) are *fight* and *ride*. These

should both be pronounced as short according to the SVLR, but he does not once succeed in this. On the other hand, where he does succeed most of the time is in making an utterance, which includes the morpheme *right*, either in its own right, or as part of the compound *alright*. It will here be illustrated by the most common of all action movie phrases:

- (11) Are you *alright*?
 (*Braveheart* 0: 41: 06)

This pronunciation is not part of his idiolect as one might expect from the results, because he pronounces the same phrase with the standard GA /ai/ in *Ransom*. This shows that he has made some effort to accommodate this important split of the PRICE vowel, which is very characteristic of SSE. However, on the whole it must be said that he does not succeed and that he is not consistent. *Kind* and *like* are two fairly frequent words in the film, which should both have been short according to the SVLR, but he gets them right in less than half the cases. He is clearly aware of the quality change, but he seems to have difficulties in using it in the right environments, as his pattern of usage often seems arbitrary, which could be based more on lexicality than on the SVLR. Apart from using the long version in short contexts, there is one occasion, which may be a case of hypercorrection, where he uses the short version in a long environment, namely in (12) below:

- (12) Longshanks *desires* peace?
 (*Braveheart* 1: 44: 53)

4.2.2. More on vowels

There are other vowel features in addition to the effects of the SVLR in SSE that have been looked at in this analysis, and they will be surveyed briefly in this section.

4.2.2.1. GOAT and FACE

These sounds would be diphthongs in many of the world's varieties of English, but in SSE, they are monophthongs. It could be debated whether the vowel of GOAT would really be realized as a diphthong in GA, but there are many speakers of GA who have at least some diphthongization of the vowel, and Gibson is one of them, according to his pronunciation in *Ransom*. Nevertheless, he has managed splendidly to produce both /o/ and /e/ as monophthongs, which has the effect of making his speech sound very 'Scottish' to an outsider. Particularly his pronunciation of /e/ has this effect, as in (13), where he gets the FACE vowels right, but misses the short realization of the PRICE vowels.

(13) Oh, it's good Scottish weather, madam. The *rain* is falling
straight down, well *slightly* to the *side like*.
(*Braveheart* 0: 28: 02)

4.2.2.2. MOUTH

In (13) above, there is also an example of the MOUTH vowel, in the word *down*. In SSE this diphthong has “a higher and more central starting point than their RP [and GA] counterpart” (Giegerich 1992: 55), making it sound more like [ʌʊ], than [aʊ]. This is also a very striking feature of SSE. Gibson has managed to get this right. This, in combination with his success at the FACE vowel makes example (13) sound very ‘Scottish’, despite the fact that he mispronounces the PRICE vowel on three occasions in it.

4.2.2.3. BIT

BIT is produced as a more central vowel in SSE than in GA, and Gibson is successful in making the adjustment. However, it is possible that this is a relatively easy change for a GA speaker to make, as it only involves some more laxing, which is probably easier than a change involving tensing. A slightly reduced form of the vowel is the only change called for, and Gibson would have this in his GA inventory already, so he would be alright, provided that he remembers not to tense the vowel when emphasizing a word containing it.

4.2.2.4. GOOSE revisited

Apart from being subject to the SVLR, there is a difference in quality for the GOOSE vowel in GA and SSE, the SSE realization being more central. Also, the GOOSE vowel merges on most occasions with the FOOT vowel. Gibson manages to produce the more central vowel more often than not, although he does make some mistakes late in the film.

5. General discussion

In summary, it is probably safe to say that Gibson gets the SSE sounds right most of the time. He has some hypercorrection, notably using more trilled /r/s than would be expected of most native speakers. He has clearly been made aware of the SVLR and has made attempts to follow it, but only with limited success. In particular, the quality change in the PRICE vowel causes him trouble. He does not get the short realization right very often, and even uses the short realization in long environments on at least one occasion. He seems to have focused on the sounds

that sound most ‘Scottish’ to a non-native speaker, the trilled /r/, the dark /ɪ/, the voiceless /w/ and for vowels, the central /ʌʊ/ and /u/, and the monophthongal /e/ and /o/. He gets these right most of the time, and that may be because they are so distinctly ‘Scottish’ to the foreigner that they become central to his ‘acting a Scotsman’, so that they are easier to remember than the more subtle duration differences caused by the SVLR. His production of SSE is somewhat inconsistent, though, and becomes more so as the film progresses. The analysis has no access to information on the sequence in which the scenes were shot, but it seems that they were shot more or less chronologically, as there is a trend towards less perfect SSE pronunciation as the film moves on. It appears that Gibson focused on his accent more at the beginning of the film, in order to establish his credentials as a Scotsman, and once that has been done, he relaxes a little. He never reverts to speaking GA, but there are more GA features late in the film, such as a more back /u/. In his last line in the film, even most of his trills have been replaced by approximants in the realization of /r/.

Each of the GA-influenced features of Gibson’s SSE accents could be found in the dialects or idiolects of native speakers of SSE, so in that way they are not ‘un-Scottish’. The inconsistent use of SSE features, the mixture of GA and SSE forms, however, would be a give-away to any native speaker of SSE. Thus, it is not very likely that any native Scot would mistake Gibson for being a native speaker of his or her own variety of English. However, given Mel Gibson’s worldwide fame, this would hardly be likely even if he spoke impeccable SSE. The majority of cinema visitors in Scotland would know him to be an American putting on an SSE accent no matter how good he was, so fooling the native audience could hardly have been the objective to start with. Instead, he would probably focus his efforts on getting an accent that was appropriate for the international, and particularly the US, market. This would also explain the loss of accent as the film proceeds. Once accepted by a given audience as speaking SSE, he can relax his accent somewhat, provided that he keeps some strikingly distinct features, such as the monophthongal /e/, and the home audience would still consider him to be speaking SSE. His somewhat ‘light’ version of the SSE would probably also make the film more accessible to his home audience, and spare *Braveheart* the fate of being subtitled in the US, which is what happened to a genuine Scottish film, *Trainspotting*.

6. Conclusion

As for linguistic credibility on the large scale, the producers of *Braveheart* have failed utterly, as the language of the historical situation that the film supposedly depicts has been transposed to a modern language situation. No one could feel that

they are perceiving the language situation of 13th century Scotland. Having said that, it must be noted that some considerable effort has been made on the part of the main actor Mel Gibson, and no doubt by dialect coach Julia Wilson Dixon, to acquire an SSE accent for the occasion. Even though his accent would probably not convince a native speaker of SSE, it is the opinion of the author of this article that Gibson's SSE accent is adequate for the international market, provided that the audience watches the film from the beginning and does not start by watching the end. As for his acquisition of the SVLR, it could be said that Gibson is aware of SVLR, but has a lot of difficulty in following it. It is, however, commendable that he has made an effort to try to acquire it; he is thus aiming for a more nuanced accent than just a farcical stereotype of SSE. Mel Gibson must have found that there is more to being a Scotsman than putting on a kilt and trilling your /r/s.

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