

## **What about historical sociophonetics? Some thoughts on a prosodic study of German sound movies of the 1930s to 1950s**

The main contributions that sociophonetics can make to historical linguistics have been seen in the implications of their results on the explanation of language change. At the same time, historical linguists contributed to sociophonetic research. However, until now little is known about the social variation at the phonetical level of older stages of language which of course has to do with the fact that sound samples of the authentic, spontaneously spoken language of previous times are missing. For this reason, conclusions could be drawn at best only from graphematic variation in written texts.

Since the invention of the sound movie at the end of the 20s of the 20th century films were made that sported the imitation of the everyday speech of that time. Many of these films are still available - but can they be used for a historic sociophonetic analysis? Studies on the linguistic expression of emotions have proven that actors can imitate emotional speech very accurately so that it is possible for listeners to recognize the expressed emotion without visual cues. This shows that the speech used by actors can resemble authentic language very closely. Hence it should be possible to gain insight into social variation of the spoken language at the beginning of the 20th century and the change it was subject to later on by examining historical movies of the corresponding period. What is the difference between the language used by a young housemaid and an older landlady? Are the phonetic parameters used as indicators for social status the same then and today, or have they changed? If so, is this related to social changes occurring after the end of the 1920s and how could this be shown?

In the early 1950s in America a change in the vocal expression was noted since the earliest sound movies. Voices seemed so different that some of them were described as "neurotic". But even today, when watching movies from the 1950s it is apparent that they sound somehow different or alien to us though we can't quite point our finger to what it is that makes these voices sound strange.

Therefore, the foremost aim of the project is to determine which acoustic parameters (e.g. F0 and its range, energy, voice quality, speech rate, pausing) are affected by the observed change and how they relate to each other and to other factors like age, sex, social status, emotional state, and so on. Differing from studies under laboratory conditions where a sentence is repeatedly spoken and just one factor is changed every time, these factors are abundant in movies and they occur simultaneously.

Using early sound movies for sociophonetic analysis has the great advantage that everyday speech of different movie characters is imitated in front of a big audience. This enables phonetical research of social variation on the base of historical material in the first place. Seeing the facial expression, gesture and appearance of actors this information can be taken into account when performing the acoustic analysis. On the other hand, linguistic normalization, e.g. the rules for German stage language by Theodor Siebs could have had an influence on the language of the movies which has to be considered when judging their authenticity.