Silver Screen Sociolinguistics: Glamour Queen Speech in 1930s American Film

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This paper examines variation in the phonetics and phonology of 'glamour queens' or 'screen divas' in American films from the 1930s, the first decade of talking pictures. It is part of a larger project that examines variation and change in the language of North American film and television from the 1930s to the present day. Here, we focus on five leading women from the beginning of this history, establishing a benchmark with which future analyses of later films will be compared: Jean Harlow in *Platinum Blonde* (1931); Mae West in *I'm No Angel* (1933); and Norma Shearer, Joan Crawford and Rosalind Russell in the all-female ensemble piece, *The Women* (1939).

Acoustic and quantitative analyses were used to examine the most important phonetic and phonological variables in North American English in the women's on-screen speech. A total of 1,688 tokens, an average of 338 per subject, were extracted from the film sound tracks and analyzed in Praat. The analysis was guided by what is known about variation and change in North American English from previous research on non-film speech, particularly the *Atlas of North American English* (Labov, Ash and Boberg 2006). This paper focuses on three variables that have particularly high diagnostic value for both regional variation and on-going change: vocalization of /r/; the low-back distinction between LOT and THOUGHT; and the low-front distinction found in New York City and other mid-Atlantic regions between TRAP and BATH. Vocalization of /r/ was assessed by calculating the percentage of non-constricted tokens out of the total number of possible vocalization contexts observed. T-tests were used to establish the statistical significance of distinctions between the low-back and low-front word classes in both the F1 (height) and F2 (backness) dimensions.

Though the five stars come from diverse regions (Kansas City, Brooklyn, Montreal, Oklahoma and Connecticut, respectively) and from different social backgrounds, the speech they adopt on screen displays a notable degree of homogeneity, suggesting partial convergence toward the pan-regional standard of the time, which was influenced more by New York City than today's western-based standard. R-vocalization ranges from 98% for West, a native New Yorker, to 46% for Shearer, who diverges in this respect from a Canadian model; Russell varies her /r/ production for comic effect. All five actresses, even those from areas that display the low-back merger today, have a solid low-back distinction in both dimensions, providing striking evidence of this variable before the recent spread of this merger, especially in Shearer's case, since Canada shows a uniform merger today. The low-front distinction, by contrast, is found only in West's speech, perhaps indicating that the phonetic value of tense BATH needed to maintain it was already negatively stigmatized in the 1930s. Indeed, Shearer maintains a low-front distinction but has BATH further back than TRAP, in the British rather than mid-Atlantic American fashion. These data offer valuable insights into the establishment and development of Standard North American English over the course of the 20th century. [Word count with title (before addition of name and affiliation): 499.]

Reference:

Labov, William, Sharon Ash and Charles Boberg. 2006. *The Atlas of North American English: Phonetics, Phonology and Sound Change*. Berlin: Mouton/De Gruyter.