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Charles Boberg
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Introduction

How has the pronunciation of North American English changed over the last century and how does it continue to evolve today? Some people have an anecdotal sense of this, based on comparing the speech of successive generations of people they know, but a broader understanding of recent changes in English pronunciation requires access to a larger set of data. One such set is the archive of recorded speech in the mass media, made over the past century or so. People who have heard old radio broadcasts or watched old films, newsreels, and television shows may be aware that the speech they contain often sounds remarkably different from that of today. Pinning down the particular factors that account for that impression is difficult, because they are numerous and complex. They include both linguistic and nonlinguistic factors, ranging from words or phrases that now sound old-fashioned or obsolete, to the pronunciation of consonants and vowels, to voice quality and intonation, to the sound quality of the recordings, which was limited by the technology of the day. Which of these factors are most important and how did they work together to reshape the sound of North American English over the course of the twentieth century, a process that continues today? This book cannot address that question at a general level but does hope to offer some insights into the role that changes in accent – especially the pronunciation of vowel sounds – play in people's impressions of how the speech in "old movies" differs from that in modern films and TV shows. To the extent that film and TV speech reflects the speech of the wider community it portrays, examining its historical development will also illuminate the recent history and current state of North American English pronunciation at a more general level.

Does film and television speech in fact reflect the speech of the wider community? In Oscar Wilde's "The Decay of Lying: An Observation," two characters discuss the relationship between art and life, arguing over the classic question of whether art imitates life, the traditional concept of mimesis with roots in the classical philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, or life imitates art, which appears to be Wilde's view (1891: 30, 38, 53). The wider implications of this debate are of no concern here, but applying the question specifically to the subject matter of this book, one might ask, does speech

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in the mass media accurately reflect the speech of the general population, with all its regional and social diversity, or does it influence popular speech, serving as a model for imitation by mass media audiences? An answer to this question requires a good sense of what popular speech is like, for comparative purposes. Fortunately, this is readily available, in the results of dozens of studies produced over the last century of academic research. This book will therefore compare these two sets of data – data on film and television speech and data on the "real" speech of the general population – to see how closely they correspond. Either result would be interesting. If they do correspond closely, then examining the evolution of film and television speech will provide valuable historical data on the evolution of North American English in general, over the eight decades since the advent of "talking pictures" at the end of the 1920s. This would provide a "real-time" perspective on long-term change over three or four generations that is not readily accessible from other sources. If they do not correspond closely, this will tell us something about the nature of the relationship between them, which is bound up with intriguing questions of social prestige, linguistic standards, and dialect ideology. In particular, to the extent that some of the speech heard in films and on television represents a "standard" type of "General North American English" that might inspire convergent changes in parts of its audience, how has that standard changed since the early twentieth century? Has popular speech anticipated its shifts, or followed its lead?

The insights sought by this book will come from a phonetic analysis of the on-screen speech of a wide sample of 180 famous actors and actresses in their most famous roles from the 1930s to today, including the television era that began in the 1950s. This analysis has produced a dataset of more than 120,000 individual phonetic measurements, which will allow us not only to track changes over time but also to examine variation among actors: speech differences related to sex, region, and ethnic group. At the broadest level, then, the book's goal will be an interdisciplinary study: contributing new data from film and television speech to the linguistic study of variation and change in North American English; and contributing a linguistic and specifically phonetic perspective to the study of North American film and television.

While that goal is the primary purpose of the book, it must be admitted that closely analyzing film and television performances also holds an intrinsic attraction, connected more with cultural appreciation than with scientific understanding. Many of the performances analyzed in this book are marvels of insight, inspiration, and talent, covering a vast cultural and emotional range, which have delighted audiences for decades. A detailed analysis of the speech they contain is just one way of more fully appreciating and engaging with this treasure of North America's cultural heritage.

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1.1 Plan of the Book

The book is divided into eight chapters. This introductory chapter will discuss the aims of the book in more detail (Section 1.2), staking out its territory between the disciplines of linguistics and film studies, establishing its theoretical context in relation to previous research on language variation and change (Section 1.3) and presenting the specific research questions it will answer (Section 1.4). It will then consider in more detail the nature of the dataset to be analyzed in subsequent chapters. Section 1.5 will examine the nature of film and TV speech as data for linguistic study, including both their limitations and their advantages. Finally, Section 1.6 will address the related issue of authenticity: the degree to which the actors chosen for roles in North American films and TV shows tend to be authentic or accurate representatives of the accents their characters should have, according to the information the audience gets from the setting and screenplay. As will be seen, there are many examples of both authentic and inauthentic accent portrayals to consider in this light.

Beyond the present chapter, Chapter 2 will explain the analytical methods used in the book, including the criteria established for assembling the sample of performances studied; how the phonetic analysis was carried out; and how the resulting measurements were analyzed, both quantitatively and statistically. The phonetic analysis used in the book is fairly technical: the concepts it involves are well known to phoneticians and speech scientists and to many sociolinguists, but will likely be mystifying to a broader audience, including most readers from a film, television, or media studies background, as well as film and TV buffs with an amateur interest in the topic. Chapter 2 therefore also includes an explanation of some "analytical preliminaries" that may be helpful for readers without a technical training in acoustic sociophonetics. The aim of these sections is to provide all potential readers with the information they need to understand the discussion of phonetic variation and change in subsequent chapters, without directing them to other sources of information; if technical questions arise in the later chapters, readers are encouraged to consult Chapter 2.

Chapter 3 will examine phonetic and phonological change in the most general variety of film and TV speech over eight decades, analyzing diachronic patterns in the pronunciation of each sound or group of sounds that has been studied in previous linguistic research. As will become evident, at the most general level these changes involve a transition from an East Coast standard of North American English based on the speech of the New York City region to a West Coast standard based on the speech of the Los Angeles region, which is identified here as modern "General North American English." Chapter 3 will therefore conclude with a summary of the main phonetic and phonological attributes of that new standard.

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The remaining chapters will examine different kinds of variation in modern on-screen speech: Chapter 4 looks at sex differences; Chapter 5 at modern New York City film and TV speech and how it differs from the General North American standard; Chapter 6 at other regional accents, from the South, the Inland North, and Canada; and Chapter 7 at ethnic accents, including those associated with actors of African American, Latino, Asian North American, and Indigenous (Native American) backgrounds. Each of these chapters will present an aggregate analysis of all the actors in each category and how they differ from other categories, as well as singling out a few individual examples for detailed analysis, to illustrate the broader patterns. As in Chapter 3, the discussion in Chapters 4–7 will make reference to previous research on each topic to situate the observed patterns in a broader context and strengthen the link between this book's analysis of on-screen speech and the analysis of off-screen speech that informs most other studies of language variation and change. Finally, Chapter 8 will offer a brief summary of the book and its main conclusions.

1.2 Aims of the Book

Although this book will seek to open up some relatively new territory in the intersection between linguistics and film and television studies, that territory will nevertheless be much closer to the traditional subject matter of linguistics than to that of media studies. Its data will come from film and television speech, but the questions it seeks to answer will be mainly linguistic and sociolinguistic questions: about how North American English has changed over the course of the twentieth century; about the linguistic and social forces driving those changes; and about phonetic variation based on actors' sex, dialect region, and ethnic identity. Questions about the medium of film and television itself and its artistic aims and cultural connections, or about the actors and other professionals who produce it, will be addressed in some places where they relate to linguistic issues, but will remain secondary. Though I do hope that the linguistic insights that emerge from the book will be of interest to at least some students of film, communication, and cultural studies, and while interdisciplinary connections will be pointed out where appropriate, this book is primarily a work of sociophonetic analysis, reflecting the academic background and professional qualifications of its author. It does not offer an artistic, cultural, or literary analysis of films and television series, much less a history of North American film and television or an instructional manual for actors or dialect coaches, topics that have been satisfactorily addressed in many other publications.

In this connection, it is also important to stress that the selection of actors, films, and television series for analysis in this book is based primarily on linguistic criteria. As discussed at greater length in Section 2.3 of Chapter 2, it is intended to provide the data

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needed for sociophonetic analysis, not to promote or condone the actors or performances chosen for that analysis, or to imply that those not chosen are of lesser importance or quality. Though the selection has generally favored some of the most famous actors and roles in the history of film and television, many equally famous examples have been omitted, while some films and actors of lesser renown have been included because they had a particular value to the research. The general preference for well-known performers and roles reflects the scientifically interesting possibility that these might have a stronger influence on popular speech, rather than an assertion that these performances are artistically superior, which of course is a subjective matter in any case. Given unlimited time and resources, an even larger sample than the 180 performances studied here would have been desirable, but the substantial amount of time required for analysis of each actor meant that difficult choices often had to be made about inclusion.

Most importantly, it should be emphasized that the aim of this book's analysis is to answer linguistic questions, not to offer a critical assessment of the dramatic skills of any actor or the artistic merits of any performance, film, or series. Given the selection bias toward well-known actors in well-known roles, popular opinion generally holds that most of the performances studied here are of excellent quality, but this will not prevent the discussion from commenting on the phonetic character or authenticity of the speech they contain, in light of what previous linguistic research reveals about regional and social variation in off-screen speech. Many elements contribute to a great performance, of which regional or social authenticity is only one, and often not the most important, a matter discussed in more detail in Section 1.6. For example, that section includes comments on the regional authenticity of Diane Keaton's performance as Annie Hall in the film of that name by Woody Allen (1977). In every other respect, in my view, Keaton's work in the film is nothing short of brilliant. As for Allen, in his subsequent film, *Manhattan* (1979), his character, Isaac Davis, comments that "[Ingmar] Bergman's the only genius in cinema today." I would agree with him on the genius of Ingmar Bergman, amply manifested in films like *Wild Strawberries* (1957) and *Fanny and Alexander* (1982), among the greatest films of all time, but would add that Allen himself is, if not the only genius, certainly one of the geniuses in American film today and certainly on a par with Bergman; it was difficult to settle on only one of his magnificent films to analyze in this book. Nothing said in the analysis of this book is intended to alter that view.

So much for what this book is *not* about. Turning to what it *does* deal with, it has three principal aims:

1. To provide a new set of acoustic phonetic data on North American English in film and television from a time span of eight decades, which can support an analysis of both change over real time and variation in relation to sex, region, and ethnic background;

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2. To compare these on-screen data with data on off-screen speech collected and analyzed by previous sociolinguistic and dialectological research; and
3. To draw conclusions about – or at least reflect on – the degree to which film and television speech accurately reflects the dynamic and varied nature of the real world it portrays, and, conversely, to consider its potential role as a model of both overtly and covertly prestigious speech, available for imitation by audience members, which could play a part in driving changes forward in the larger community.

1.3 Theoretical Context

The research program just outlined will be pursued in a theoretical context developed over almost a century of previous research on variation and change in North American English. This section will discuss the conceptual background that underlies the research in this book, with a view to motivating the specific research questions enumerated in the following section.

1.3.1 Dialectology: Traditional Dialect Regions of North America

Serious academic study of the linguistic features of North American English – how they evolved and how they differ across the continent – began in the early twentieth century, with monographs by keen observers of language like Kenyon (1924), Krapp (1925), Kurath (1928), and Mencken (1937), and with a project called the *Linguistic Atlas of the United States and Canada*, based on European models, which intended to produce maps of variation in words, grammatical forms, and pronunciations across the entire continent. That goal was never fully achieved, but important regional studies were published, including regional atlases of New England (Kurath et al. 1939–1943), the Atlantic seaboard (Kurath 1949; Kurath and McDavid 1961; McDavid and O'Cain 1980), the South (Pederson, McDaniel, and Adams 1986–1992) and the Upper Midwest (Allen 1973–1976), along with smaller-scale reports on other regions, such as Marckwardt (1957) on the North-Central states, Reed (1961) on the Pacific Northwest, and Shuy (1962) on Illinois. Together, these studies provide an invaluable benchmark of the state of American English in the 1930s, exactly the period when the analysis of this book begins. At the most general level they revealed a geographic division of American English into three broad dialect regions. These are based historically on the separate areas of original, seventeenth-century English-speaking settlement along the Atlantic coast but now, following westward migration during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, extend as far inland as the Mississippi River:

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- The North: the region originating in New England, now extending along the Canadian border from Boston to Chicago;
- The Midland: the region originating in the Philadelphia area, now extending through the southern portion of the Midwest to St. Louis and Kansas City, as well as the Appalachian-Ozarkian area south of the Ohio River; and
- The South: the region originating in the early settlement of Virginia, the Carolinas and Georgia, now extending along the Gulf Coast to southeast Texas.

Beyond the Mississippi, the relatively clear dialect divisions of the East were blurred by intermingled settlement streams. These produced a western region notable for comparative homogeneity over wide areas, including the central plains, the mountain states, the southwest, the northwest, and the Pacific coast. Much of this region has only recently been carefully studied.

Though linguistic atlas research in the northern United States included a small sample of Canadians for comparative purposes, research focused on Canadian English began later, in the 1950s, with the smaller-scale survey of Avis (1954–1956) in Ontario and the phonetic description of Gregg (1957a, 1957b) in Vancouver. A comparable benchmark for Canadian English appeared in the early 1970s, with the nationwide survey of Scargill and Warkentyne (1972), summarized in Warkentyne (1971). Though these studies identified many small regional differences across Canada, a consensus emerged that Canadian English was remarkably homogeneous across most of the country, with the notable exception of Newfoundland and to a lesser extent the Maritime provinces (Bloomfield 1948: 63; Avis 1973: 50–51; but see Boberg (2010) for a more recent view).

Around the same time, the *Dictionary of American Regional English* (Cassidy and Hall 1985–2012), a coast-to-coast survey of regional vocabulary differences in American English, produced a modified view of American dialect divisions. Based on its data, Carver (1987) emphasized a basic North-South split as primary, dividing the previous Midland region into northern and southern sections on either side of the Ohio River. The Appalachian-Ozarkian Upper South was united with the coastal Lower South, while the southern portion of the Midwest formed a Lower North transition zone, in which Southern features gradually receded toward the Upper North.

1.3.2 Sociolinguistics: Variation and Change in Speech Communities

In the mid-1960s, the study of North American English, which had previously focused mainly on static or recessive features of traditional dialects in rural or small-town populations, was reoriented toward sociolinguistic research on variation and change

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in large urban speech communities by the work of William Labov, particularly in his study of New York City (1966, 1972a). Rather than implementing a traditional dialect questionnaire, Labov carried out sociolinguistic interviews with a socially stratified sample of the members of a speech community, eliciting a range of different styles of speech but focused particularly on what he calls the "vernacular": "the style in which the minimum attention is given to the monitoring of speech. Observation of the vernacular gives us the most systematic data for our analysis of linguistic structure" (1972a: 208).

This was not always easily accomplished, however: Labov's research convinced him that awareness of observation causes people to modify their speech, introducing "irregular phonological and grammatical patterns, with a great deal of 'hypercorrection,'" which obscures the "fundamental relations which determine the course of linguistic evolution" (1972a: 208). Much of his early work therefore involved developing effective methods for gaining observational access to a speaker's vernacular, despite the potentially intrusive presence of an observer, a problem he called the Observer's Paradox: "the aim of linguistic research in the community must be to find out how people talk when they are not being systematically observed; yet we can only obtain these data by systematic observation" (1972a: 209). One method was to collect data anonymously through ordinary interactions with strangers, who were unaware of observation, the approach he took in a study of variation in the pronunciation of postvocalic /r/ by employees in three New York City department stores (1972a: 49–50, 61). The other method was to limit the effect of observation in a sociolinguistic interview by encouraging the participant to produce narratives of personal experience: stories about traumatic or exciting episodes in the participant's life, in which the participant's attention would be focused on relating the emotional intensity of the event rather than on reaction to the presence of an interviewer; this is the approach he took in a study of variation in five phonological variables among the population of Manhattan's Lower East Side (1972a: 92–94, 209).

By observing and recording language in use in the speech community, Labov hoped to generate data that could be used to answer important questions not of settlement history or regional culture but of linguistic theory. In particular, he wished to investigate how and why community members vary in their use of communal grammars, reflecting aspects of their social identities, and how some of this variation is related to changes in progress, thus illuminating the linguistic and social mechanisms of language change. In answer to the first of these questions, his data revealed that language varies systematically in relation to social factors like age, sex, and social class (education, occupation, etc.) and that the range of variants used by each individual indicates that this variation arises not from a mixture of distinct individual dialects in a speech community, but from a single, communal grammar shared by all its members, which is inherently variable and includes a set of sociolinguistic norms about the social meaning of variation. Individual

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speakers agree on which variants are standard and nonstandard, but use them in different proportions, depending on the context of communication and the social values and identities they wish to convey. Concern with achieving the overt prestige attached to standard or "correct" variants was greatest in the middle of the social class range, comprising the upper working and lower middle classes, groups that have both a desire and an opportunity for social advancement and seek to symbolize their upward social mobility by linguistic means. Within these central social groups, orientation toward overtly prestigious speech was greatest among women, who seemed to be particularly sensitive to the social values attached to linguistic variables, whereas many men, particularly at the lower end of the social class scale, were more likely to be attracted by the "covert prestige" of nonstandard speech, which they see as more masculine.

Labov's data also revealed two types of linguistic change in progress. Changes from below involve spontaneous and subconscious innovations originating within the community, which develop a local prestige associated with community membership and status. Changes from above involve more conscious efforts by some community members to advance their own social status by adopting from outside the community linguistic features that have a global prestige associated with the transregional or national standard dialect. Changes from below lead to linguistic and dialect diversification because they produce different outcomes in each location, whereas changes from above lead to linguistic homogeneity and dialect convergence because they involve the diffusion of common linguistic elements across speech communities that are in cultural contact. Labov found that both types of change could operate successively on the same variables (1972a: 178–180): raising of /æh/ (BATH) and /oh/ (THOUGHT-CLOTH) began as a change from below in New York City speech, differentiating it from other dialects, but by the time Labov observed it in the 1960s, the raising was being "corrected" from above, with some speakers substituting unraised variants like those heard in Western American English. (Notation of phonemes and word classes throughout the book will follow both the binary system of Labov's work and the lexical sets of Wells [1982]; for an exposition of these systems, see Section 2.4 of Chapter 2.) "*R*-dropping," more accurately called vocalization of /r/ (saying *dark* so it sounds like *dock*, or *source* so it sounds like *sauce*, etc.), was also originally a change from below when it began many centuries ago in England, but reached the Atlantic seaboard of the United States as a change from above, reflecting the high prestige of British pronunciation; the reintroduction of postvocalic /r/ that Labov observed in New York City in the 1960s was a second change from above, based on an American rather than British model.

Labov studied both variation and change and found that they are closely linked, as first proposed by Weinrich, Labov, and Herzog (1968): not all variation involves change, but all change must involve variation during a period of competition between new and

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old forms, as the new form diffuses gradually through the speech community. If the old form resists elimination, stable variation between the two forms can persist over several generations, with each variant developing its own social value, usually linked to formality of speech and overt versus covert social prestige. In studying contemporary linguistic variation, it is not always immediately evident which variables represent a transitory stage in language change and which are a stable feature of the speech community. Changes are usually linked to age, with younger people using new forms more than older people, whereas stable variables tend to align with social class. Sociolinguists therefore usually look for evidence of ongoing change in "apparent time," by comparing generations of speakers and assuming that the differences between them reflect the apparent passage of time. This methodological construct is based on the "apparent-time hypothesis," that language remains stable over speakers' adult lifetimes, so that older speakers represent the state of the language when they acquired it in their youth. A fifty-year-old speaker can therefore provide evidence of how the language sounded forty years ago, which can be compared with the speech of younger and older speakers to assess the direction of intergenerational change. Labov used the apparent-time construct in his studies of change in progress on Martha's Vineyard (1963, 1972a) and in New York City (1966, 1972a) and Philadelphia (1980, 1990).

The problem with the apparent-time construct is that intergenerational variation does not always reflect ongoing change at the community level. Its core assumption of stability across speakers' adult lifetimes has been critically examined by several recent studies, with various results. A study of changes in Texas speech by Bailey et al. (1991) found strong support for it; a similar conclusion is reached by a more general review of past research by Cukor-Avila and Bailey (2013). On the other hand, research on Queen Elizabeth II's annual Christmas broadcasts by Harrington, Palethorpe, and Watson (2000a, 2000b), on Montreal French by Sankoff and Blondeau (2007), and on Philadelphia English by Wagner (2012) found that people can and do change the way they speak over their lifetimes. In some cases, they change in the same direction as the community, adopting innovative features in later life, but in others they adjust their use of what are known to be stable variables over their lifetimes, a pattern called age-grading. This can be a response to transitions through major life stages, like education, starting a career, marriage, starting a family, and retirement, which trigger adjustments in social behavior, including language. Because each generation goes through similar life stages, the pattern repeats itself from one generation to the next: individuals change over their lifetimes, but the community as a whole remains stable. An age-graded variable would therefore provide misleading evidence of change because differences between younger and older people detected at the time of an apparent-time study would disappear as the younger people aged.

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