Accent in North American Film and Television: A Sociophonetic Analysis. By Charles Boberg. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (hardcover), 2021. ISBN: 9781107150447

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Beyond actual contact with people from different places, one of the main ways by which we are exposed to new accents and dialects is through media. The bulk of our non-direct language contact occurs via television and film, although radio and some types of social media (e.g., TikTok) contribute, too. In the case of accents which are not spoken near us, it may be that our only impression of an accent is through actors on a TV show or a film. Sociolinguistic research on language in television and film over the past ten years has grown and has had a broad focus; some studies have focused on how accents and dialect can be used to stereotype or differentiate characters (Fought & Eisenhauer 2022; Lippi-Green 2012); others have examined specific linguistic features (Tagliamonte & Roberts 2005; Reichelt & Durham 2017), while others yet aim to see what can be learned from and about the use of language, accents, and dialect in fiction more generally (Bednarek 2018; Hodson 2014; Queen 2015).

The current volume takes a slightly different tack; it is not concerned with how accurate portrayals of different accents are or what can be uncovered about language on film and television, but instead uses these media to examine how General North American English (GNAE) as well as other North American accents are changing. For Boberg, GNAE is the "neutral or transregional variety of North American English most commonly heard in the mass media today" (106). He adds that his "definition exclude[s] dialects that use nonstandard grammar and vocabulary" (106), meaning that GNAE is here seen to be a purely white variety, with the assumption that racialized minorities speak differently (and are discussed separately in the volume). Boberg's analysis of changes in North American varieties is conducted by examining the vowel realizations of male and female actors from different periods and from different regions. He includes a wide range of films (87) and television shows (37) which came out between 1931 and 2015. His dataset comprises 180 actors, who serve as datapoints across time and location. Most actors are judged to use GNAE (72% of sample), but some are classed as being from a specific region or of a specific ethnicity.

For each empirical chapter, the volume provides a thorough overview of the specific features that were analyzed and what was uncovered. The actors who are found to be ahead or behind the overall average in terms of the various changes are discussed in detail and their mean formant values are provided in graphs, as are those of the actors who, within the sections dealing with non-GNAE varieties, diverge the most from GNAE and also have the highest rates of features that are regionally or ethnically restricted (i.e., pin/pen merger in the South and in AAE).

Chapter 1 primarily introduces how film and television can be used for sociolinguistic, or more specifically sociophonetic, research. It outlines the various ways people have used such media to research language and explains the focus of the present book. It also provides brief introductions to dialectology and sound change, and explains what is meant by authenticity, a notion which comes up often when considering language in fictional contexts as actors often use accents and dialects not their own. In this volume, as noted above, this issue is avoided by considering only cases where actors are using their own dialect (be it regional or non-regional). It also discusses how often actors local to a particular area (and their accents) are portrayed on television and film, underlining that some locations are poorly represented, while others are more accurately and frequently portrayed (e.g. NYC, which is covered in a chapter of its own). The chapter introduces a range of films and shows, many of which are included in the analysis.

Chapter 2 deals with the methodology of the volume. It is a very detailed chapter, discussing not only how features can vary across accents as well as within them and how sociophonetics studies this accent variation, but also introducing the dataset which has been used for the analysis. Sections 2.1 and 2.2, focusing on variation in phonemes and sociophonetics more generally, are very clear and would certainly be useful as an introduction to sociophonetic methods for students or researchers who are new to the field. The second part of the chapter introduces the sample used, detailing all the actors selected from various films and shows (180 speakers in total with an average of 700 tokens each across the full range of features) and discussing how the sample is broken down in terms of the two periods studied (1933-1965, 1965-2015), men and women, as well as in terms of ethnic group, and region. Actors were selected for the sample according to various criteria (e.g., fame, L1 English speaker status, sufficient material for analysis, how authentic their performances were felt to be of their actual dialect) and the sample aimed to represent regional and ethnic categories as well as "standard" varieties, although many choices are most likely also influenced by the author's own film knowledge and preferences. The following sections of the chapter detail the specific phonemes and word classes to be examined. Although the constriction of /r/ in postvocalic positions is one of the features considered (it is relevant to NYC, New England, and some Southern accents), all of the other features studied are vowels. The features are related to changes in different parts of North America either regionally or over time. Although there is quite a lot to take in, tables (such as 2.5 on page 96) make it reasonably easy to understand which features are being examined.

Chapter 3 is the first analytical chapter of the volume and details what was found in terms of the emergence of General North American English. It does this by including mainly the actors who Boberg judges to use GNAE, and it compares the actors in the first time period to those in the second to see what features have changed. For many of the features it shows how there is a clear difference between 1933-1965 and 1965-2015 (e.g., the increase in the constriction of /r/ and a merger of the LOT and THOUGHT vowels). The chapter concludes by providing a calculation of the General North American English Phonetic innovation index which gives a sense of how involved in the various changes different actors are (i.e., high scores reflect that they have more innovations). It also provides a few charts plotting the

mean formant values for several key actors. Some actors are shown to more advanced than other actors in their cohort.

The presentation of the results is clear for the most part, although when the figures included all the actors together and individual actors were mentioned in text, it was difficult to pick them out among other actors as there were no labels (e.g., Figure 3.9 on page 141). Labelling the key actors discussed would have made things a bit clearer.

Chapter 4 discusses differences between men and women in GNAE. It first compares male and female actors to assess who is leading the changes over time (to some extent this was also covered in chapter 3), here focusing on which features show the most differences between the sexes. As found in many sociolinguistic studies, women tend to be ahead of men for many of the incoming changes (mainly the same features as in chapter 3). The third section of the chapter considers a small selection of LGBTQ+ actors to see if their vowel use is markedly different from the general patterns. This section is less detailed than others because of the small numbers of actors considered: Few actors from the first time period could be included due to the fact that "homosexuality was still subject to legal censure and strong social stigma" (177) and LGBTQ+ actors were likely to have concealed their sexuality.

Having noted in Chapter 1 that New York City is one of the most frequently portrayed cities in film and that many actors in Boberg's sample hail from there, Chapter 5 makes the city its focus and compares the actors who are from there but do not have a NYC accent to those that do. As in previous chapters, Boberg presents an index – this time a New York City Index (NYCI). He finds several features (e.g., lack of rhoticity in the later period, contrasts in TRAP-BATH and LOT-THOUGHT) that mark actors as having an NYC accent and notes that it is often actors portraying (or from) Italian and Jewish communities who have the strongest NYCI.

Chapter 6 deals with other regional accents, including accents from the South, the Inland North, and Canada. Each subsection presents the key features of the region (e.g., monophthongization of /ay-ayT/ for the South and Canadian raising for Canada) and which actors score most highly on their regional accent index.

Chapter 7 focuses on the accents of racialized minorities, such as African American English, Latino English, Asian North American English, and Indigenous English. The format for this chapter is similar to the previous chapters, although the smaller sample sizes mean that only a handful of features is considered for each group. It is worth noting here that the AAE sample does not include any films or shows made after 1994 or any actors born after 1961, despite the fact that the overall corpus includes actors born in the 1980s and films and shows that came out in 2015. This is unfortunate and means that any sociophonetic changes in younger African Americans are not studied and likely renders Boberg's claim that AAE is more conservative than GNAE inaccurate.

Chapter 8 provides an overall summary of the results and some conclusions. It underlines how the study has allowed a real time analysis of accent change in North America, in a way that is only possible by using film and television. It rightly underlines that it is the most extensive volume to date on film and television and the realm of sociophonetics and that the results represent the analysis of more than 120,000 measurements of vowel quality.

Taken as a whole, the volume goes into extensive detail in terms of how the research was conducted and what the findings are, which means that subsequent researchers will be able to apply the same methods easily elsewhere for a further comparison. While this wealth of information is useful and will ensure replicability, it also makes for a rather dense read, and consequently it is less suitable for undergraduate classes. The range of concepts discussed in the introductory chapters are very well laid out and explained, the choices made are well justified, and the inclusion of a wide range of actors adds to the value of the volume. Without giving specific names, it is worth noting that it might have been wise to exclude a few actors whose problematic (and/or criminal) offscreen behavior has come to light in the past few years, not least as their mention could potentially be distressing for some readers. The behavior is not specifically commented on but would be well known to most audiences.

Overall, the volume provides an extensive overview of accent change in North America since the 1930s focusing primarily, but not solely, on GNAE. It provides a clear method for future research and so will be a valuable resource for researchers interested in vowels in North America and for accent analysis more generally.

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