

## The early days of oral language teaching: the diffusion of German in fascist Italy

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### Abstract

This paper describes the German language taught in Italy during the crucial period of Fascism, adopting a socio-linguistic longitudinal perspective [1]. The work is based on the comparison of some acoustic phonetic features of two German language courses produced by the Linguaphone Institute and distributed in Italy during the thirties and the fifties respectively [2]. Particular attention is paid to the social variety of oral German which was chosen to be taught as an "overall representative type of vernacular". Results of the analysis show a connection between the chosen German variety, the adopted teaching methods, and fascist ideologies.

### 1. Introduction

In the wake of historical-comparative linguistics and, in particular, in the wake of the recent attention paid by the School of Prague to phonetics and phonology – according to Saussure's structuralist stimulus – pronunciation, accent and intonation have become more and more relevant not only in linguistics but also in the field of language teaching. During the first thirty years of the twentieth century in Germany, professors Theodor Siebs and Erich Drach (among others) made several attempts at the unification and conformation of pronunciation and of the so-called *Sprechkunde* (the science of knowing how to perform speech, see [3]). This process of normativization – which aimed at making people understand each other in the different regions of the new State, thus creating a new national sentiment and a collective imagination, culminated in the first training programs for teachers and professional people and in the German national school syllabuses imposed by the NSLB (National-socialist association of teachers which was, after 1933, directly under the supervision of the Ministry of Education of the NSDAP Government and under the direction of Erich Drach, until his death in 1935). Finally, this process reached Italy through the Linguaphone German course published in the linguistics magazine *Le Lingue Estere* [4] from 1934 to 1937.

Through the analysis of the disk recordings by Linguaphone – partly performed by Siebs and Drach themselves – we investigated the German variety spoken (or, rather, orally taught) at the time. In particular, we shed light on the following topics: the social variety of spoken German chosen to be taught as an "overall representative type of German vernacular"; the regional or supra-regional (standard) variety serving as a model for this purpose; the influence of artificial varieties – such as German *Bühnenaussprache* (a set of guidelines for a standard pronunciation of German for the stage [5]) or *Sprecherziehung* (speech training [6]) – on the first 'electronic/auditory' course; and possible resonances of the political (i.e. fascist) ideologies of the time. Comparing

this course (course A) with another one printed almost twenty years later (course B) helped us to clarify these issues. Examples of the diachronic, as well as diastratic and diatopic implications of the German language as taught to foreign students will be presented throughout this article.

### 2. The analysis of Linguaphone courses

The first Linguaphone course under investigation (course A) was printed at the beginning of the thirties and it represents the very first attempt to teach everyday spoken German as a foreign language by means of mechanical supports. The teaching methodology, combining the relatively new 'natural' (or 'direct') method – though without the presence of a teacher – and the Berliner records technology, were extremely innovative for the time. Moreover, the possibility of spreading the 'right' (German) pronunciation all over the country and abroad, without having to rely on the highly specialized symbol system for articulatory-phonetic description, represented a further success of this medium in linguistics and language education. This happened especially in Germany, where the new nationalist form of purism (which was also taking root in Italy) was concerned with both vocabulary and pronunciation, and the debate on the necessity of linguistic reforms was still open.

The Linguaphone Institute (England) produced courses in 23 different languages. However, only English, German, French and Spanish courses were sold in Italy. Here the teaching methodology was considered such an innovation that in 1931 a ministerial memorandum was issued to recommend the use of this tool, together with gramophones and radio-phones, in Italian public schools, although with limited success [7]. Again on March 24<sup>th</sup>, 1933 Minister of State Pietro Fedele praised the Linguaphone method, which he had personally tried, in a public letter republished December 1934 in the fifth issue (p. 8) of *Le Lingue Estere* [4]. These courses had already been proposed to the fascist Italian audience (with little success, as noted), so in 1934 they were slightly modified and printed in Milan for *Le Lingue Estere* (see [2]).

#### 2.1. Corpus

The corpus for this study consists of the two German language courses by Linguaphone mentioned above, both cut on 78 rpm discs for the gramophone – which was, at that time, as popular as the radio – and edited by the German phonetician Paul Menzerath. While course A was adapted for *Le Lingue Estere*, and printed in Italy, course B was printed in England and distributed in Italy by "La Favella" [8] after Second World War, during the fifties.

Course A is made up of 2 lessons on German phonetics recorded by Theodor Siebs, and 30 'speech' lessons of increasing levels of difficulty, divided into two parts

(description; dialogue) and 'recited' by important linguists, phoneticians and experts of theatre of that period such as P. Menzerath, E. Drach, K. Niessen, W. Gerlach, E. Funke, H. Heydeck, P. Eisheuer, E. Hernstadt-Oettingen and (Frau) Beyers.

Course B is composed of 2 lessons on German sounds and 50 "speech" lessons of increasing levels of difficulty. All the speakers worked for the *Nordwestdeutschen Rundfunk* (Northwestern Broadcast) of Cologne, apart from the linguists W. Kuhlmann and W. Meyer-Eppler. Their names are G. Bergen, T. Cronenberg, S. Krebs, H. Stein, W. Neufert, L. John. The contents of course B are only slightly different from those of course A, thus enabling the comparison.

A first screening of the socio-phonetically emblematic acoustic-phonetic features characterising the speakers of the two courses led us to the selection of three lessons (basic, intermediate and advanced, respectively) recited by one main speaker per each course: Erich Drach for course A and Hermann Stein for course B.

The six lessons deal with different topics, as their titles show. Course A: lessons no. 1 "Die Familie Schneider" ('The Schneiders'), no. 14 "Spiel und Sport" ('Play and Sport'), no. 28 "Das Automobil" ('Automobiles'). Course B: lessons no. 1 "Meine Familie" ('My Family'), no. 21 "Das deutsche Geld" ('German money'), no. 46 "Handel und Industrie" ('Trade and Industry').

## 2.2. Methods

We analysed with Praat the utterances of the two main speakers, focusing on speech rate, syllables, pauses and the pronunciation of /r/ allophones. Analyses were conducted on every 20 speech units separated by pauses (prosodically defined phrases) on the first 20 occurrences.

We then compared the means of our two groups – which had different variables – by using a bi-dimensional analysis of variance. We considered year (of production) and lesson as independent variables, with speaking tempo as the dependent variable. Finally, post hoc Scheffé tests provided us with specific information on which means were significantly different from each other. In order to better understand the language teaching strategies and the epistemology underlying the kind of German taught as a foreign language we compared the results of our analysis with the language theories to be found in *Le Lingue Estere* as well as in the main works of the Linguaphone speakers.

## 3. The social and regional variety: diastratic and diatopic features

The use of different allophones of /r/ constitutes, in our opinion, a noteworthy parameter that may be representative of the sociolinguistic situation of German speakers, in terms of diatopic as well as diastratic features.

Since the first publication of *Deutsche Bühnenaussprache* in 1898 [5] the question of the pronunciation of the /r/ had been central. Siebs had imposed the *gerollte Zungenspitzen-r* (apical trill [r]), typical for the southern (Bavarian) dialects, because of its clarity on the stage, claiming that a lot of people used a vocalic /r/, especially after vowels in final syllable position. Although the edition of 1933 provided the substandard use of the trilled uvular [ʀ], the alveolar articulation was still to be preferred. Indeed, the Siebsian norm created a sort of taboo concerning the vocalic realisation of

this phoneme as [ɐ] as well as of the fricative uvular [ʁ], which was actually a settled habit in Germany, as demonstrated by the acoustic-phonetic investigations of this allophone conducted by e.g. Jespersen, Sievers, Vietor, and later on also by Meyer-Eppler (see [9]).

Even though editor Paul Menzerath intended to present to learners the true everyday oral language spoken in Germany (for example by choosing speakers from five different regions of the nation), in the introduction to course A he insisted on the high social status represented by the high German vernacular of cultivated people ("hochdeutsche Umgangssprache der Gebildeten"). This was a common trend of the time, as proved by Siebs' introduction to the 1927 edition of *Deutsche Bühnenaussprache Hochsprache* [5] and by the words of G.B. Shaw presenting the Linguaphone course of English, also published on *Le Lingue Estere*: "The two simplest and commonest words in any language are «yes» and «no». But no two numbers of the [Linguaphone course] committee pronounce them exactly alike. All that can be said is that every member pronounces them in such a way that they would not only be intelligible in every English-speaking country, but would stamp the speaker as a cultivated person as distinguished from an ignorant and illiterate one" ([4] 1935/1, p. 1). In fact, the samples of course A document a kind of artificial pronunciation and formal register which was intended to characterize each speaker as a person of high culture and high social standing. We must consider that the didactics of German as a foreign language were in their first steps and they tended to present an ideal standard variety, though in this case some specific regional features were not ignored, as we infer from the typical Rhenish and Franconian accents of some of the speakers.

The kind of German spoken by Erich Drach in course A can be defined as artificial, based on his *Sprechkunde* [6] and his conception of rhetoric [10] in which intonation is strictly tied to the meaning of a sentence. The so-called *Sinntonwort* played a leading role, being a word (*Wort*) which carries, through its pitch intonation, the whole meaning and sense of the utterance. Moreover Drach tried to observe the Siebsian rules for the pronunciation of the /r/ to the letter (i.e. the rules in force in the 1927's edition of the book), and there is almost no evidence of uvular /r/ either in initial and final syllable position (see Figure 1).

Our analysis shows that only 21.4% of fricatives [ʁ] are found in initial syllable position, thus representing an exception in advanced lessons. This exception is due to the performance of Drach, particularly when speaking with his highest, but probably more natural, speech rate (see Figure 2).

Our spectrogram analysis of the allophone /r/ shows not only a different degree of the 'prescribed' trilled apical alveolar [r] among the speakers of course A but also a trilled uvular [ʀ], a fricative uvular [ʁ] and a vocalic [ɐ] articulation in the other samples of course B. We did not find any tap and approximant articulations, probably because of the didactic aim of the recordings.

The trilled alveolar pronunciation [r] generally prevails, yet it gradually disappears together with the increase of the speech tempo. Especially in final syllable position, which implies in the majority of the cases an [ə] preceding the examined phoneme, a vocalic pronunciation is almost unavoidable. Even Siebs himself seems to have been conscious of the unnaturalness of this strong pronunciation of /r/ in such a

position, and of the reductions occurring when speaking quickly, already in 1912 ([5], p. 17).

Course	Lesson level	r	R	ʁ	ʁ̥
Initial					
A	B	100	0	0	0
A	I	100	0	0	0
A	A	78.6	0	21.4	0
B	B	0	66.7	33.3	0
(B)	I	0	0	100	0
B	A	0	26.7	83.3	0
Final					
A	B	100	0	0	0
A	I	66.7	0	0	30
A	A	9.1	0	0	90.9
B	B	0	0	7.7	92.3
B	I	0	0	9.1	90.9
B	A	0	0	13.3	86.7

Figure 1: Percentage of articulation of the allophone /r/.

The following two short examples might make things clearer. The utterance [der gro:sfa:tər zitst in anəm zes] ('der Großvater sitzt in einem Sessel') was extracted from the basic lesson of course A (no.1). The unit is made up of 9 syllables pronounced in 3.38 seconds. At this speech rate Drach is able to articulate every single sound correctly in every context, even after a *schwa*. The next speech utterance was taken from the intermediate lesson of course A (n.14); it lasts 2.90 seconds in which the same speaker pronounces 15 syllables: [rələ ʊn raifn̩ gəhørən tsvar niçt auf d̩n byrg̩stak] ('Roller und Reifen gehören zwar nicht auf den Bürgersteig'). The about doubled speech rate of the intermediate lesson (see Figure 2) still enables the 'correct' pronunciation in initial syllable position, but no longer in final position after [ə]. As shown in Figure 1, the same process occurred in the advanced lesson, where the vocalic pronunciation was used in more than 90% of the cases.

The German spoken in course B appears, on the other hand, more natural. Nevertheless, the course exhibited less regional variety, as all the speakers but two came from the same region, the NRW. This choice should not be underestimated, since the geopolitical situation after WWII was completely different from the one of twenty years before: it might have not been by chance that most of the speakers came exactly from the British zone of occupation.

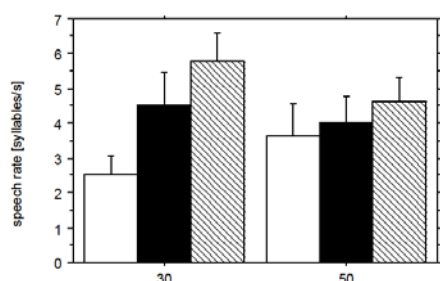


Figure 2: Speech rate (in syllables/s) for both courses and lessons (white boxes indicate the basic lesson, black boxes the intermediate lesson, striped boxes the advanced lesson).

Hermann Stein (see Figure 1) does not pronounce [r] at all. In initial syllable position he uses – as German people still do – the trilled [ʀ] or the fricative [ʁ] uvular, whereas in final position he tends to produce a high natural vocalic /r/ (i.e. [ʁ]). In course B there seems to be no intent to present a particular refined pronunciation of the allophone (also because of the different epistemological frame of the time); on the other hand the increase in speech rate from one lesson to the other is not so high as to influence pronunciation. However, speech rate plays an important role for the investigations of this study, as we will show in the next paragraph.

#### 4. Speech rate and teaching methodologies

Compared with course B, course A presents a much higher degree of expectation from learners.

In fact, for speech rate we found a highly significant effect of lesson ( $F(2,114)=74.98$ ,  $p<.001$ ) as well as an also highly significant interaction between year and lesson ( $F(2,114)=23.028$ ,  $p<.001$ ). The effect of lesson split by year remains highly significant for both years: 1930's:  $F(2,57)=89.052$ ,  $p<.001$ ; 1950's:  $F(2,57)=8.272$ ,  $p<.001$  (see Figure 2).

Post hoc Scheffé tests showed a highly significant rise in speech rate ( $p<.001$ ) in all the later lessons of the 1930's course but only for the last lesson of the 1950's material ( $p<.001$  with regard to the first,  $p<.05$  with regard to the middle lesson). This seems to be in line with the language teaching approach adopted in fascist Italy which used to present the main difficulties after few basic lessons (for details see, for example, the article "Un'esigenza dell'insegnamento linguistico: EDUCARE A PARLARE", published in *Le Lingue Estere* [4] 1934/10, p. 1.).

The effect of year split by lesson showed clear effects of year for the first and late lessons:  $F(1,38)=24.267$ ,  $p<.001$  and  $F(1,38)=12.875$ ,  $p<.001$ , respectively: the first 1930's lesson is significantly slower (2.51 (sd=.561) vs 3.66 (.886) syllables/s), the late lesson significantly faster (5.78 (.80) vs 4.65 (.671)) than the same lessons of the 1950's material. This result could reflect the diffusion of literacy skills among the population in the examined periods and, consequently, the level chosen to reach the right target audience for each course.

With respect to the mean duration of single utterances there is only a highly significant effect of year ( $F(1,114)=11.939$ ,  $p<.001$ ): the mean utterance duration is longer in the 1930's material: 2.03 (.844) vs 1.43 (1.02) seconds in 1950.

With regard to the mean number of syllables *per* utterance (see Figure 3) there were significant main effects of year and lesson ( $F(1,114)=9.828$ ,  $p<.01$  and  $F(2,114) = 9.538$ ,  $p<.001$ ) as well as a significant interaction ( $F(2,114)=3.892$ ,  $p<.05$ ): the syllable count within the 1930's material is generally higher (8.98 (5.873)) than in the 1950's (6.05 (5.312)). The post-hoc tests of the analysis split by year only revealed a significant rise of the syllable count for the last lesson of the 1930's material ( $p<.05$  with regard to the middle lesson,  $p<.001$  with regard to the first one).

Mean pause durations (see Figure 4) also show clear effects of year and lesson ( $F(1,114) = 10.739$ ,  $p < .01$  and  $F(2,114) = 7.875$ ,  $p < .001$ ): Pauses in the 1930's material are shorter (642.85 (349.240) ms) than in the 1950's course (953.13 (690.110)) and the pauses of the first lesson are significantly ( $p < .01$ ) longer with respect to the later ones.

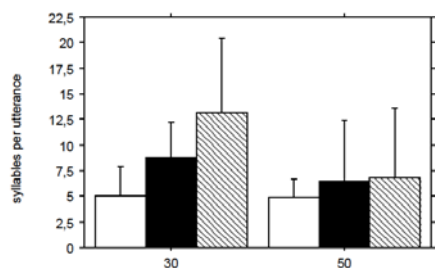


Figure 3: Syllables per utterance for both courses and lessons (white boxes indicate the basic lesson, black boxes the intermediate lesson, striped boxes the advanced lesson).

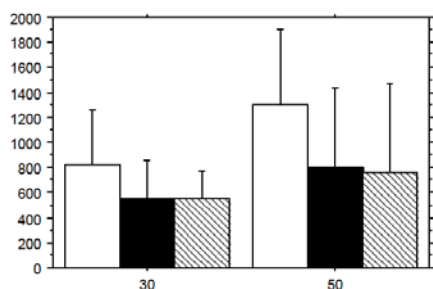


Figure 4: Pause durations (in ms) for both courses and lessons (white boxes indicate the basic lesson, black boxes the intermediate lesson, striped boxes the advanced lesson).

## 5. Conclusions

Insofar as the political question is concerned, we found some evidence for the intention to present a formal ‘hyper-stylised’ (theatrical) register of German, with an emphasized intonation, in course A. This emphasis cannot just be attributed to the so called ‘teacher talk’ and ‘foreigner talk’, whose characteristics – such as hyper-articulation or a slower speech rate – we find only in the first few lessons. Some of these aspects are rather due to the fact that the speakers of course A were cultivated people with a high social status who – most of them being active members of the NS party (see [2]) – aimed at an academic register, ignoring everyday linguistic behaviour. On the one hand Siebs ([5] 1912, p. 5; 1927, p. 4) considered this particular way of speaking as an act of political faith for the new Nation. On the other hand Drach, who was responsible for the German syllabus under the NSDAP, attached very much importance to the way of speaking, having conceived the ‘speech training’ as “innere Sprachbildung” [10] even before Leo Weisgerber [11].

Beyond these linguistic features, course A used the Gothic alphabet, and it made use of some emblematic pictures of the time, specially chosen by the editors of *Le Lingue Estere* to represent the Italian lifestyle. Finally, the course was suitable for the purposes of the fascist ideology, which urged the learning of foreign languages in order to propagate the proud “new Italian mankind” and the important (imperial) culture of “Italianization” ([4] 1934/12, p. 1). Speakers of course A, in particular Drach, attached much importance to the sounds of their language, which would mirror the German spirit and

soul. This kind of nationalism disappeared after Second World War, and thus in course B.

To sum up, the way of speaking used in course A reflects neither the everyday language spoken in the Third Reich nor the particular form of ‘Nazi style and register’, which was actually spoken only by leading politicians (see [12]). It represents a model of language teaching – actually meant to be used in Germany as well as abroad – conceived by academic linguists favouring the high register of *Bühnenaussprache* and the rhetorical style of *Sprecherziehung*. Apparently the much more informal and natural vernacular of course B is due to the performance of the new speakers who had much more experience with the outer world of ‘normal’ speakers, although it cannot be excluded that a new didactic approach to oral language teaching had already taken place in the late thirties (see [13]).

## 6. Acknowledgements

Though the results of the present study are due to the collaboration of the three authors, paragraphs no. 1, 2 and 3 were written by Valentina Russo; paragraph no. 4 by Bernd Pompino-Marschall, and paragraph no. 5 by Norbert Dittmar.

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