A Fascinating Personage in the History of Phonetics: The Phonetics and the Politics of Elise Richter
Natasha Warner, University of Arizona & Max Planck Institute, Nijmegen

Introduction

- Elise Richter was an early phonetician as well as a Romance philologist.
- She was the first woman instructor and then professor in Austria or Germany, and she was an activist for women’s rights.
- Richter is often declared “not a feminist” or her politics are deemed irrelevant.
- What does Richter say about the women’s rights movement?
- Are Richter’s approach to science, her activism, and her relationship to the women’s rights movement related?

Richter’s science

Areas Richter worked in
- Romance philology (both phonology and syntax)
- Phonetics: Especially as explanation for sound changes
- Laboratory phonology: Perceptual data for affricates as 1 sound vs. 2
- Psycholinguistics
- Prosody: Effects of stress and intonation on language change

Richter’s methodological breadth
- Historical reconstruction (philology)
- Kymograph traces (of breathing or of speech)
- Perception of backwards speech (playing records backwards) by L1 and L2 listeners
- Corpus linguistics
- “Psychological” experiments: frightening the speaker!

After her life…
- Many scholars (Renzi, Tanzmeister, Maltkie) praise Richter’s breadth of topics and methods, her anticipation of later trends
- However, her work had surprisingly little impact on later scholars and was not followed up

Selected references
- Richter, Elise. 1980: "Elise Richter: 1865-1942. Bestimmung einer Sprachwissenschaftlerin". In: Richter’s science, her fight for a career, and also her avoidance of the women’s movement.

Richter’s politics

- Richter clearly fought at least for her own rights. She encountered great resistance as a woman pursuing an academic career, but did not give up.
- She was also an activist for other women’s rights (teaching Latin at a girls’ school, founding the Association of Academic Women of Austria, volunteering for a women’s political party).
- Still, many declare her “not a feminist” due to two quotations taken out of context (e.g. Christmann 1980, Pulgram 1979).
- New data: a count of all mentions of gender in Richter’s autobiography. 8 mentions of the women’s movement, of which 4 positive, 1 negative, 3 positive with negative. Other comments are on discrimination, lack of it, advocacy, etc.
- Thus, most mentions of the women’s movement are positive.

- A negative quote:
  - "I did not enter the university as a women’s rights activist. Even less was I thinking of the career as an income source. For we ‘firsts’ the basic impulse was the push toward self-development, the desire to use our abilities in the most suitable way…." (Richter 1997[1940]: 110).
- Quotations aligning herself with feminism are not widely cited:
  - “Beginning from the first moment of my academic life, I paid attention to never exceeding my rights, but always using them completely. Every meeting, every action that I was allowed to attend, I attended. The old gentlemen had to get used to the sight of me…. What was for others a duty was a pleasure, a joy, for me, in the consciousness of being the first woman to exercise [each] right” (1997[1940]: 109).
  - “For I was aware that much depended on the first impression of the female Matura [high school] graduate, the first female university student, the first Dozentin [female instructor]. I gave the women’s rights fighters the first piece of proof they could rely on, particularly because I completely avoided everything having to do with the women’s rights movement and everything ‘warlike’ and worked forward purely objectively. My name will have a certain meaning in the history of the women’s movement because of that” (1997[1940]: 240).

Relating science and politics

- Richter was unusual in turning to phonetics, and then she related phonetics to historical sound and syntactic change, and studied phonological structure through experiments.
- She made connections in her science where others did not, and refused to be limited by methods, fields, or tradition.
- Association with the women’s movement would have limited her: “I avoided the ‘women’s movement’ … I could not make my way in the university as an activist for women’s rights” (1997[1940]: 210).
- Refusal to accept limits marks Richter’s science, her fight for a career, and also her avoidance of the women’s movement.