

A Fascinating Personage in the History of Phonetics: The Phonetics and the Politics of Elise Richter

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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!

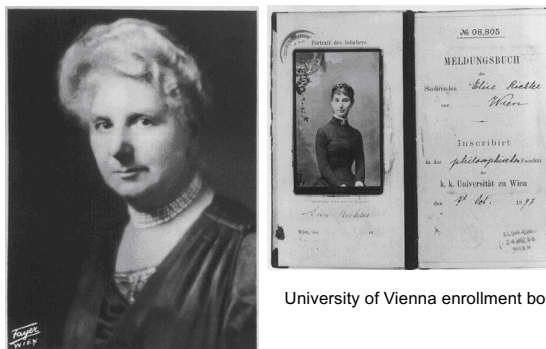
After her life....

- Many scholars (Renzi, Tanzmeister, Malkiel) 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

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Figure 1: Elise Richter (Beck-Busse 2008)



University of Vienna enrollment book

Figure 2: Timeline (Christmann 1980, Richter 1997[1940])

- 1865 Richter born, Vienna
- Age 7-16: Formal education (tutoring), together with older sister
- Age 20: Severe illness, leading to long-term disability
- Age 24-25: Parents' deaths, followed by hiring tutors and auditing university courses
- 1896: Women legally allowed to graduate from school (Matura)
- 1897: Richter passes Matura and matriculates at the University of Vienna (one of the three first women students)
- 1901: Ph.D. dissertation: historical Romance word order
- 1904: Habilitation: Romance philology topic
- 1907: Permission to teach at the university; first female instructor in Austria or Germany, in any field
- 1912, 1922: Richter's first phonetics publications (textbook/for the public)
- 1921: Richter becomes adjunct professor (unpaid)
- 1922, 1923, or 1927: Position made salaried
- 1930: First original data publication in phonetics
- 1935: University obtains permission to continue Richter's position past retirement age because she is indispensable for teaching phonetics
- 1938: Nazi takeover of Austria: Richter loses access to library, theater, etc., and is forbidden to teach
- 1940: Last phonetics publication (out of 8 articles), in a Dutch journal; writes autobiography *The Sum of Life*
- Oct. 1942: Richter sisters deported to Theresienstadt concentration camp
- June 1943: Richter dies at Theresienstadt
- 1943

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.