

# Falling in love again and again: Marlene Dietrich and the iconization of non-native English<sup>1</sup>

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Icons are those stars who have become widely established and circulated as enduring international cult figures. Numbered among these is Marlene Dietrich, one of a class of international performers who present in English although not native speakers. Her performances can be theorized as Referee Design, by which speakers target linguistic codes other than their own. Dietrich came to stardom in the 1930 German-made film, *The Blue Angel*, which provided her career-long signature tune, 'Falling in love again'. Analysis of her pronunciation shows her English as markedly non-native. Her subsequent Hollywood films crafted Dietrich's image, enregistering her non-native accent and baritone quality as the first and lasting voice of the femme fatale. For three decades from the 1940s Dietrich toured a live show renowned for her stunning costumes. Comparison of a 1964 stage performance of 'Falling in love again' reveals her English as much more native but still retaining a hearably different accent, which is now valorized as her distinctive voice. Dietrich's decades of repeated performances established her iconicity, and her appearance and vocal style – both its timbre and pronunciation – were widely circulated, referenced, imitated, and occasionally parodied. Living the femme fatale persona in her own life, and cultivating her image with extreme reflexivity, Marlene Dietrich achieved the ultimate ingroup identification. In language and appearance, she became her own referee.

Ikonen sind jene Stars, die sich als bleibende internationale Kultfiguren etabliert haben. Zu diesen zählt Marlene Dietrich, eine derjenigen internationalen Darsteller, die in englischer Sprache auftreten, obgleich es nicht ihre Muttersprache ist. Ihre Darbietungen können als ‚Referee Design‘ bezeichnet werden, wobei sich Sprecher eines Codes bedienen, der nicht ihr Eigener ist. Dietrich wurde durch den 1930 produzierten Film *Der Blaue Engel* zum Star. Diesem entstammt auch der Titel ‚Ich bin von Kopf bis Fuß‘, welcher zu ihrem Markenzeichen wurde. Die Analyse ihrer Englischausssprache weist sie zu dieser Zeit als Nicht-Muttersprachlerin aus. Ihre späteren Hollywoodfilme festigten Dietrichs Image. Ihre einzigartige Aussprache und baritonartige Sprechweise wurden zum Sinnbild der ‚Femme Fatale‘. Ab den 40er Jahren trat Dietrich drei Jahrzehnte lang in einer für ihre atemberaubenden Kostüme bekannten Bühnenaufführung auf. Ein Vergleich mit einer Aufführung von ‚Ich bin von Kopf bis Fuß‘ aus dem

Jahre 1964 zeigt, dass ihre englische Aussprache seither muttersprachlicher geworden ist, aber noch immer einen hörbaren Akzent aufweist, der bereits als ihr Erkennungsmerkmal betrachtet wird. Durch jahrzehntelang wiederholte Aufführungen hat sich Dietrich als Ikone durchgesetzt. Ihr Aussehen und ihre Sprechweise – Klangfarbe sowie Aussprache – waren weit verbreitet und wurden ein Vielfaches nachgeahmt und manchmal sogar parodiert. Dietrich hat die *Femme Fatale* auch im Privaten gelebt, ihr Image mit höchster Selbstreflexion kultiviert und erreichte dadurch die Spitze der Ingroup-Identifikation: in Sprache und Aussehen wurde sie ihr eigener ‚Referee‘. [German]

KEYWORDS: Performance, singing, non-native English, Referee Design, Audience Design, enregisterment, Dietrich, *femme fatale*, iconization

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*If she had nothing more than her voice she could break your heart with it.*

Ernest Hemingway (1952: 92)

## PROLOGUE

It is July 1930. A steamer is approaching the coast of Morocco through fog. As a woman crosses the crowded deck to the rail, her suitcase falls open. An urbane fellow-passenger picks up the contents for her and offers further assistance. ‘I won’t need any help’, she replies.

At least, that is what Marlene Dietrich is scripted to say. But there is consternation on the set in Hollywood. The sound man is astonished; director Josef von Sternberg calls *Cut*. What has come out for ‘help’ is a non-native disyllable, an epenthetic vowel creating ‘hellubh’, as von Sternberg will transcribe it later (1966: 249).<sup>2</sup> What is to be done? He knows he could mask the pronunciation with background sound such as a foghorn. His staff suggest that the line could be re-recorded later once the actor’s English has improved – after all, she has been in America only three months.

But von Sternberg believes that much more than a single word is at stake for his leading lady. Presentation of her face has been honed to portrait perfection by the studio, and these are her opening lines in her first Hollywood film. A stage parody of Germanic English will negate the charm and mystique of her appearance. The sounds ‘would have made a laughing-stock of both of us’, von Sternberg wrote later; ‘... what sort of a performance could she give if a foghorn blew whenever she opened her mouth?’ (1966: 249–250). If the studio executives hear that pronunciation when viewing the day’s takes, she will lose the role. Her daughter’s biography says:

He and she were in the process of creating a star, a luminous being. Such a creature had to have her own unique sound... not relying on cheap mechanical tricks. She had to seduce the audiences of the world with her voice, as she would their eyes, and they had to start this process from the very beginning. (Riva 1993: 90)

Von Sternberg clears the set and remonstrates with Dietrich (in German). But take follows unsuccessful take, and she simply adds new mispronunciations. She is distraught and in tears, the rest of the cast and crew are appalled at her treatment. After hours, von Sternberg eventually suggests: pronounce *help* as if all four letters were German. She immediately gets it, the extra and misshapen sounds drop away and, nearly 50 attempts later, the director has his usable footage.

The biographies agree the incident was pivotal in the making of Dietrich as a star. But what von Sternberg's linguistic target was is ambiguous. The initial account in his autobiography implies that he wanted strictly native-like pronunciation – 'an image that had no accent, German or otherwise' (1966: 245). But later he reports Dietrich 'mentioned that she might never be able to discard an accent. With this I agreed, but I stated that the accent would have to be acceptable to me' (1966: 249). If she could not pass as a native speaker, at least she must not be parodically non-native.<sup>3</sup>

The film's final soundtrack reveals that Dietrich did solve the epenthetic problem, but her /lp/ in 'help' is still not quite native-like. The /p/ is a hypercorrect, lightly aspirated plosive where native pronunciation would usually give an unreleased stop. The /l/ is also hypercorrectly clear. What Dietrich has produced – and von Sternberg has at last approved – is a slight but distinctively articulated non-native pronunciation. Other sounds in the sentence combine to make an accent that is enigmatic because listeners hear something different but cannot specify quite what it is or means. And that is exactly what director and actor want for the role of a cabaret performer who has come to Morocco on a one-way ticket from an unknown past. It sets the pattern for Dietrich's future performed English and the mysterious edge of linguistic otherness which will be part of her persona. Her star has risen with language as a core component.

## 1. THEORETICAL INCURSIONS

English has been the leading language of international mediated performance for nearly a hundred years. In that period the widening availability of audio and visual media technologies have carried the forms of American popular culture to international dominance. This has produced a century of performers who are not native speakers of English, but whose performances are mainly enacted and recorded in English – Greta Garbo, Maurice Chevalier, Arnold Schwarzenegger, ABBA, Björk. Marlene Dietrich was arguably the most stellar and iconic of these. Her career spanned 50 years across the mid 20th century, from the early 'golden ages' of audio disc recording and sound films, and made her a cult figure. This study analyzes the linguistic character of Dietrich's English, mainly in repeat performances of her signature tune 'Falling in love again'. It examines the nature of Dietrich's celebrity and persona, and the role that her voice quality and non-native English played in this. And it uses the case of Marlene to address

wider issues of the place of language in staged and mediated performance, particularly in the creation, establishment and iconization of a celebrity performer.

### *Dietrich and Referee Design*

My first approach to Dietrich's linguistic persona is through the theory of Audience Design (Bell 1984, 2001),<sup>4</sup> which distinguishes between *Responsive* and *Initiative* styles. In responsive mode, speaker style is oriented to its audience, tending towards production of a normative or unmarked style. In initiative mode, speakers adopt alternative styles in order to redefine situations and roles. They do this through Referee Design, that is by targeting the language of a reference group which is usually external to them. While the audience are generally present within an interaction, referees are third persons whose salience makes them influential on speakers' styles even in their absence.

Referee Design is in essence a model of language performance, whether everyday or staged (see Bell and Gibson's Introduction to this issue). In particular, the mediated performance of language – because of the dislocation of time and place between performer and audience – always involves a clear referee dimension. Referee Design can be theorized along a number of dichotomies (Bell 1992):

***Ingroup vs outgroup.*** Dietrich is involved in the most self-evident instance of outgroup referee design through performing in a language (English) other than her own (German). Foreign-language performance is a special case of second language acquisition, and we may expect the known effects of acquisition processes to apply. I will also draw attention to the other end of this polarity: the particular case of ingroup referee design in which speakers target a heightened version of their own linguistic production.

***Short term vs longterm.*** Referee design may be short term or long term, from the most fleeting intertextuality of lexical or phonetic reference, to permanent accent bending or language choice (as in diglossia). Dietrich's initial performance of English was short term – produced in Germany for a film made in English. But when she subsequently moved to and was based in the U.S., the dynamic became longer term: she was a non-native speaker in an English-speaking milieu and targeting the English language through many decades.

***Accurate vs inaccurate.*** For many non-native speakers it may be appropriate to characterize their production as a life-long pursuit of native-like competency. Accuracy in such a case involves gauging the extent to which a non-native speaker achieves native-like norms. This will be my default assumption for Dietrich. We should, however, treat it as an open question whether Dietrich's performances in English should be necessarily and always interpreted in this way. Her non-nativeness was hearable to audiences, but did not attract the

stigma usually attributed to inability. Rather, it was valorized as positive. While not reifying non-nativeness (or even a native/non-native dichotomy), we need to recognize that it formed the basis of her linguistic persona.

*Successful vs unsuccessful.* Evaluating accuracy is a matter for the referee group, but the success of Referee Design depends on the actual audience. In the case of mid-20th-century non-native performers such as Dietrich, these two audiences largely coincide. Native speakers of American English are her reference point, and they are also her target audience, so the issues of accuracy and success are intertwined. Dietrich is presumably in a narrow sense strictly unsuccessful in her referee design – that is, her lifelong pronunciation remains identifiably non-native. Native-speaker audiences can hear this, so she does not pass as a native. The issue of whether such passing was her goal is one we will address below.

### *Enregistering Dietrich*

Our approach to Dietrich's linguistic persona requires consideration of how such non-nativeness attracts social value beyond just an ascription of foreignness: how it comes to carry the meanings attributed to it. How and why does a referee design develop and become valued? In the Audience Design framework, styles accrue social meanings by their association with particular groups (Bell 1984). Features and styles are first differentiated, then may be evaluated, adopted by others, and finally overtly identified or performed. Silverstein's exposition (2003) of these 'orders of indexicality' provides a more detailed unpacking of the processes and their ideological involvements (for a lucid explanation, see Johnstone and Kiesling 2008). Socioculturally we can treat the valorization of non-nativeness as an instance of 'enregisterment', a concept drawn from Agha's study (2003) of the establishment of British Received Pronunciation (RP). Enregisterment is the process by which a style registers in public space as indexing certain sociocultural values and positioning.

Agha (2003) traces factors which across two centuries led to the establishment of RP, including the significant association of styles with iconic social groupings or personae. These may be individualized in 'characterological figures': Agha notes the iconic status of Dickens' character, Uriah Heep, as exemplar of h-dropping, and of the Queen as a model of RP – 'the Queen's English'. I will return below to examine the extent to which we may regard Dietrich as an icon, the process of enregisterment of her accent, and she herself as a characterological figure.

### *The femme fatale*

An icon of what, though? Dietrich's persona is broadly that of the sultry/icy *femme fatale*. In Western culture, this persona is as old as Eve and includes characteristics such as:

- mystery, unknowability, undefinability
- otherness, marked through transgressing race boundaries (exotic, oriental, European traits), and through
- transgressing gender boundaries – campness, androgyny and bisexuality
- powerful and bewitching sexuality, which is yoked with
- disdain, coldness, unattainability, leading to
- male servitude and domination, and on to
- darkness, chaos, and death.

All of these features would be associated in varying degrees with Dietrich in her films. In their study of the femme fatale in cinema, Hanson and O’Rawe (2010) maintain the persona was only fully formulated in Western culture in the late 19th century, where it quickly fed from the visual arts and theatre (most notably *Salome* as figured by Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley) into early films. The original cinematic femme fatale was the American Theda Bara (an anagram of ‘Death Arab’), who made dozens of silent films in the years before 1920 with stereotypical titles such as *The Devil’s Daughter*, *The Serpent*, *The Vixen* and *The Tiger Woman* (Sully 2010). Publicists coined the term ‘vamp’ specifically for her, and gave her a false French/Egyptian parentage and a suitably foreign accent for interviews (Mainon and Ursini 2009).

Dietrich’s predecessor and rival, the Swede Greta Garbo, redefined the physique of the femme fatale to a 1920s slenderness late in the silent-film era, and she and Dietrich carried this forward into sound films. Probably the most famous exemplar was MGM’s *Mata Hari*, starring Garbo (1931) – the same year that Dietrich made *Dishonored* over at Paramount Studios, with a cognate character and plot (Mainon and Ursini 2009). Thus, the image of the femme fatale from *Salome* and Theda Bara onwards was that of the exotic, non-Anglo-American Other. But the femme fatale received a voice only with the coming of sound film, circa 1930. That voice had to be – and was – non-native.

In performance, language does not operate in a vacuum. Other dimensions make up the whole, and may signify as much as or more than language. The three ‘icon’ chapters in Gemünden and Desjardins’ *Dietrich Icon* collection (2007) deal with her face, legs and voice – to which should be added a fourth feature, costume. Staging was central to Dietrich’s art, and she was meticulous in overseeing all aspects of her shows. Her face was crafted by makeup and lights (Koepnick 2007). In the 1920s, Dietrich’s legs were known before she was, through modelling for advertisements. The legs eventually attracted academic essays of their own (Alter 2007). Always under her own design from her first sound film, her costuming was central to her stage shows and became ever more crucial as she aged. We will return repeatedly below to the intertwining of vocality with visuality. This paper, then, focuses on Marlene Dietrich as a case study of language performance and addresses questions such as these:

- What was Marlene Dietrich's performed persona?
- What were the non-linguistic dimensions of this persona?
- What part did language and voice play in her persona?
- How was her persona developed and enregistered?
- How were voice and language enregistered as part of this persona?
- Once developed and enregistered, how was her persona and its linguistic dimension circulated and maintained?

## 2. THE MAKING OF MARLENE

She was born Maria Magdalene Dietrich, on 27 December 1901 near Berlin,<sup>5</sup> and as a teenager telescoped the syllables of her name to produce 'Marlene'. She came from a good Prussian family, and was brought up under strict discipline, including that of speaking Hochdeutsch (High German). Her upbringing involved a strict regime of lessons, which included English from native-speaking tutors as well as at school, although she later characterized it as 'poor classroom instruction' (Dietrich 1989: 27). There were English conversation sessions every evening for her and her sister (Riva 1993: 13). At age four she had an English nanny, and one governess was British and taught her English.

She began in the theatre in Berlin in 1922, and worked as an actor, singer, model and dancer throughout the 1920s. In this time she had about a dozen stage acting roles, eventually some leads, typically cast as a coquette, courtesan or mistress. She drew attention for her ability to create an air of allure and mystery through studied remoteness while apparently doing nothing on stage – the *femme fatale*. She also won parts in silent films made in Berlin in the twenties, appearing in 16 largely undistinguished silents, including eventually as the lead. She was mentioned as a successor – or critiqued as an imitator – of Hollywood's Swedish star, Greta Garbo, to whom she bore an 'uncanny resemblance' (Riva 1993: 78). Her singing style followed Claire Waldoff, a husky-voiced cabaret singer and her partner for a time. Dietrich's first recording, in 1928, was of the lesbian number 'Wenn die beste Freundin/When the special girlfriend' from a show where she had played a lead which, according to Skaerved (2003: 42), made her 'notorious overnight' in Berlin. Photos and descriptions up to 1930 show Dietrich as rather plump in both face and body, far from her later *svelte* image.

Through the twenties Dietrich participated to the full in the hedonistic culture and lifestyle of Weimar-Republic Berlin. She adopted the *garçonne* style and made it her own on film and in life – 'the girl who looks like a man who looks like a girl' (Kosta 2009: 91). She married Rudi Sieber in 1923, and while they mostly lived apart from the 1930s, he remained an important friend. Her only child, Maria, was later her biographer (Riva 1993). By 1929, then, Dietrich was an experienced and recognized stage and silent-film performer in Berlin, although no star. Enter Josef von Sternberg.

### 3. THE BLUE ANGEL/DER BLAUE ENGEL

Von Sternberg was an Austrian American who had directed silent films and one successful sound film in Hollywood. He came to Berlin in 1929 to make a film with Emil Jannings, the German star who that year had won the first ever acting Oscar for his performance in von Sternberg's silent, *The Last Command*. For the new production they took their material from a short 1905 novel *Professor Unrat* by Heinrich Mann (older brother to Thomas), which von Sternberg and his writers (including the playwright Carl Zuckmayer) freely cut and reshaped. The film would be one of the first German sound films, to be shot also in English.

#### *Casting Lola Lola*

Jannings was to be the star as the professor, but von Sternberg had trouble finding an actress to suit his image of Rath's seductress, Lola Lola. Many candidates were rejected for their weak English or singing or appearance (Baxter 2010: 100). Von Sternberg discovered Dietrich in a play, but the production team opposed him because of 'her Berlin accent and barely adequate English; a singing voice that hovered between a growl and a purr, with no upper register; . . . and at least ten kilos overweight' (Baxter 2010: 105). But Paramount were looking for a rival to MGM's Garbo – 'another such sublime creature – loaded with foreign mystery, European sophistication, hypnotic accented voice' (Riva 1993: 77). Sternberg believed he had found a star and cast her.

At the start of filming *The Blue Angel* in 1929, Dietrich could scarcely be described as a speaker of English. She had had school English plus home tutoring as a teenager, had never been to Britain, and may never have had a natural conversation in English. The single line of stage English which led to her casting is the first evidence of her producing the language. Skaerved claims the line was in 'perfect English' (2003: 49): clearly the American members of the production team thought otherwise, apart from von Sternberg.

#### *The story*

*The Blue Angel* tells the story of Professor Immanuel Rath, longtime master at the town's Gymnasium (elite senior school). He is a tyrannical and repressed teacher, who one day discovers his students being distracted by revealing postcards of Lola Lola, a performer at the Blue Angel. He goes to the waterfront saloon to remonstrate over the corruption of his students but is captivated by Lola, who directs her theme song to him: 'Ich bin von Kopf bis Fuß/Falling in love again'. He returns the next evening, spends the night with her and loses his job. They marry, and he joins the travelling troupe. From there it is downhill to Rath's ruin – he becomes the seller of Lola's postcards, and performs in the show as a clown. When the company returns to his home town, he is headlined as the lead attraction, and is humiliated on stage. He sees Lola flirting with the company's



strong man, tries to strangle her in a mad fury and is restrained. Freed again, he creeps from the Blue Angel as Lola reprises 'Falling in love again'. He stumbles back to his former school, and dies clinging to his old desk.

### *Language on the set*

*The Blue Angel* was filmed from November 1929 to January 1930 in Berlin, and language was an issue. All the actors were German, and some were barely comprehensible in English. Even in the English version, characters speak German if there is reason for them to do so: Jannings lectures in (heavily-accented) English, but his students speak German. Scenes were being shot first in German, then repeated in English, and they often differed. Chunks of crucial dialogue are omitted in the English version, leaving some scenes played in near-silence and changing crucial elements of plot, character and motivation (Petro 2007). Some shots were altered or deleted to cover the non-native English (Baxter 2010: 115), and the English version ended up twelve minutes shorter. Much is lost linguistically between the German and English films simply because the English script is sanitized and the non-native cast could not hope to control dialect nuances. Whole tracts of sociolinguistic space remain closed in the English version. Unsurprisingly, the German version is regarded as better and more authoritative.

In the English version Lola is presented as a native speaker. Both her impresario and a visiting sea captain speak English to her, and when Rath addresses her in German, she says in English: 'Sorry, but you'll have to talk my language'. Specifically, von Sternberg aimed to transform her into 'an American vamp' (Dietrich 1989: 52), and American English was the referee variety. He changed or dropped difficult lines, masked poor pronunciation with offstage sounds, dictated lines to her. In the end, Dietrich writes, 'Nobody, I believe, could fault my pronunciation' (1989: 49). We address this claim below: she was after all a German speaker, performing English in a German-speaking milieu.

The final film is a striking, dark achievement with many features that look like a contemporary arthouse work rather than one of the earliest sound films. Lighting, staging, décor, costume and music interweave to create the underworld of a stifling, sleazy waterfront saloon and its characters. *Der Blaue Engel* premiered in Berlin on 1 April 1930 to acclaim, particularly for Dietrich: a star was launched. She had already contracted to Paramount to film in Hollywood with von Sternberg, and left that same night for Bremen and New York. Paramount held the English version back until after *Morocco* was released in the U.S. late that year. Audiences struggled to follow the Germanic English, and today's DVD carries a warning about 'the somewhat hair-raising accents of some of the actors'. The outgroup referee design had been neither accurate nor successful, but in Marlene's case this led on to something more lasting and nuanced.

### *The film's songs*

The songs were written during the filming and became a centerpiece of the film, not just reflecting but directing the action and character development for von Sternberg. The music was by Friedrich Holländer, a leading Berlin composer and musician, who appears in the film as pianist with the stage band. He already had many well-known songs to his credit, some of which Dietrich would later perform and record (he would write more songs for her in the U.S., notably for the 1948 Billy Wilder film *A Foreign Affair*). The German lyrics of the film's songs are variously credited, but appear to have been largely by Holländer, probably together with Robert Liebmann, one of the film's scriptwriters. His lyrics are notably strong and sinewy, evidencing shrewd psychology and often sharp social or political messages. He wrote tunes which catered to the considerable limitations of Dietrich's voice, its naturally low register and limited range. They were 'based on her two best notes', writes Baxter (2010: 118), licensing the frequent use of *Sprechstimme*, the half-spoken style which would increasingly suit her voice as it aged.<sup>6</sup> Lola's are cabaret-style songs, *Schlager* (loosely 'hits'), and in the film she sings four on stage at the tavern.

#### 4. 'FALLING IN LOVE AGAIN/ICH BIN VON KOPF BIS FUß'

'Ich bin von Kopf bis Fuß' was a late inclusion in the film, according to Baxter, a challenge 'to compose a love song for a woman who didn't believe in love' (2010: 119). Holländer's German lyric is a declaration that Lola is focused on love, as my translation below on the right shows. According to Holländer, writing later in 1930, the song 'gave such sharp contours to the role of Marlene Dietrich as the seductive cabaret singer that it naturally determined the plot. This song immediately created the atmosphere that the material powerfully demanded' (quoted in Kosta 2009: 117).

The English lyrics for the songs were (probably) written by Sammy Lerner,<sup>7</sup> an American stage composer and lyricist. Perhaps unfortunately for Dietrich and posterity, the English translation of the refrain deviates far from the original, not just in the literalness of its wording but also in its sentiment and therefore its meaning within the film. In English the chorus 'falling in love again' conveys more or less the opposite sense to the German original, weakening the acerbity of Holländer's German lyrics, and therefore the force of its warning to Rath. What in Holländer's German was a manifesto for a life actively oriented to sex became in English more of a romantic lament for a woman's passive helplessness in the face of love. Holländer and Dietrich are both said to have 'detested' the sweetened English version (Baxter 2010: 120). According to Riva, Dietrich exclaimed at home about it during the filming:

Now, that one awful song I told you about has English lyrics. What do you think it is called? 'Falling in Love Again!' That's not English for 'I'm from Head to Foot

English version	German original	Translation of German
Falling in love again Never wanted to What's a girl to do?*	Ich bin von Kopf bis Fuß Auf Liebe eingestellt, Denn das ist meine Welt Und sonst gar nichts.	From head to foot I am set for love For that is my world And nothing else besides.
Love's always been my game Play it how I may I was made that way Can't help it	Das ist, was soll ich machen, Meine Natur, Ich kann halt lieben nur Und sonst gar nichts.	What am I to do - That is my nature, All I can do is love And nothing else besides.
Men cluster to me Like moths around a flame And if their wings burn I know I'm not to blame	Männer umschwirr'n mich, Wie Motten um das Licht. Und wenn sie verbrennen, Ja dafür kann ich nichts.	Men swirl around me Like moths around the light And if they get burned up I can't do anything about it.
Falling in love again Never wanted to What's a girl to do?*	Ich bin von Kopf bis Fuß Auf Liebe eingestellt, Denn das ist meine Welt Und sonst gar nichts.	From head to foot, I am set for love For that is my world And nothing else besides.

\*In later performances: 'What am I to do?'

Made for Love.' It's bad enough I have to sing that awful song also in English without all the words being changed and now making no sense *whatsoever!* (Riva 1993: 70)

Ironically this left Dietrich with an eventual signature song whose words she is supposed to have disliked. In another way, however, this had its fortunate side for her. It is arguable that the song would never have become popular in Depression-era U.S. if its lyrics had remained as sharply unromantic as the German original. Horowitz (2008: 227) holds that if Dietrich had tried to maintain the toughness of Lola in her Hollywood roles, she would never have become established in the U.S. In the process of accommodating, however, she became something other than the sinewy character actor prefigured in *Blue Angel*. Some critics – not least her daughter (Riva 1993) – claim she thus missed her potential in order to become an American star.

### *Performing 'Falling in love again': 1930*

The Blue Angel is a raucous, chaotic, swilling milieu – a low-class beer hall not a middle-class cabaret (Prawer 2002: 27). Lola sways in the centre of a cramped stage, hands on hips, and begins her song. She wears a top hat and displays a lot of leg, topped by black suspenders. The stage behind her is crowded with a semi-circle of half a dozen bored, unattractive women drinking beer.

Smoke drifts up from the customers. The impresario conducts Rath to the box seat above naked figureheads, and interrupts the song to introduce him as the guest of honour. The jazz band seated below the gallery play Holländer's slow waltz tune, wistful violin and clarinet interweaving with his quiet piano. Lola sits on a beer barrel to begin again, leans back with her legs crooked, lifts and grasps one knee and sings directly up to Rath: the pose will become a classic (see still photograph at <http://www.imdb.com/media/rm407214080/tt0020697>). She repeats verse and chorus several times, varying her pose while Rath preens himself, hopelessly enraptured, captured and lost. As a performance it deserves the iconic status it will achieve, stunning in all respects – filming, lighting, staging, décor, costume, movement, music, singing (URL <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HaZDiKRT1is>).

At the end of the film after Rath's humiliation, breakdown and attempt to strangle her, Lola reprises 'Falling in love again' in totally different fashion. Costumed in black hat and dress, she sits alone astride a chair on an empty stage. This time there is no come-hither. Hands on hips, she defiantly punches out 'can't help it', affirming her own life and its style as Rath stumbles out of the Blue Angel to his death.

### *Voice quality*

What then of voice and language in this song? First to note is that Dietrich's characteristic low, husky voice quality is in evidence only in the 'Men cluster to me' strophe. In the rest of the song she sings more, higher and more melodiously than she did in later life. That is, the voice quality popularly regarded as the iconic Dietrich trademark is largely absent from this 1930 performance. The same holds for the other English songs and those in the German version (since voice quality can carry between languages). She sings most of most songs quite high in the voice, with only occasional dips to a lower range and quality. The four lines of the 'Men cluster to me' verse of 'Falling' is the longest low-register stretch in either language version. It seems then that low register was not an inevitable or even dominant aspect of Dietrich's voice in this film, and perhaps at this period, although it would later become enregistered as a core aspect of her characterological figure.

### *Pronunciation*

In the film, the song is begun (with a verse that is not repeated later) and interrupted. Then it is sung through twice in the four-strophe structure as transcribed above. My analysis of Dietrich's pronunciation is based on the first of these two full runs. Analyses of the phonetics of popular singing have usually used five markers of attempts to sound American (the 'USA-5': Simpson 1999). These are shown in Table 1, together with the THOUGHT VOWEL. This 1930 recording does predate by over 30 years the earliest songs to which the 'USA-5' have been applied (by Trudgill 1983), and it is possible that 'sounding American' back then

**Table 1:** Actual out of potential Americanisms in Marlene Dietrich’s performance of ‘Falling in love again’ in *The Blue Angel*, 1930 (tokens in parentheses are intermediate)

Feature	Tokens	American N	Total N
Postvocalic /r/	girl 2, never 2, cluster, their, burn	0	7
Medial /t/ flapping	wanted 2	0	2
BATH fronting to [æ]	can’t 3	0	3
PRICE monophthongization to [a]	my, I 5	1	6
LOT unrounding/lowering to [a]	what 2, wanted 2, was	1 (+2)	5
THOUGHT unrounding/lowering to [a]	falling 2, always	2	3
<b>Total</b>		4 (+2)	26

did not target the same features as in the early 1960s. However, in default of evidence for such a change, I use the established variables for comparison, noting that they have also been applied over 30 years after the first songs analyzed by Trudgill (Simpson 1999; see also Gibson 2010).

The declared referee target of *American* pronunciation is little in evidence. In total the transcribed data in Table 1 have 26 potential American realizations of these six features: four are American, 20 are not, and two are intermediate. There are no postvocalic /r/s, flapped /t/s or fronted BATH vowels. The overall effect for the listener supports the specifics: this does not sound like American English, but rather like a British English target being non-natively pronounced – and this is the impression that holds throughout the rest of the film’s speech and singing. Dietrich’s English often has an L2 British-oriented correctness to it which is quite at odds with the target and with the German version. It would seem then that von Sternberg and Dietrich were unsuccessful in their targeting of American English.

Instead, what is there is a registerable non-nativeness. Table 2 presents the features that I hear as non-native – consonantal, vocalic and prosodic – most of which are L1 transfer effects. There is some non-nativism in the pronunciation of consonants, particularly in the aspiration of the stops in unstressed ‘to’. Affrication of ‘th’, and labiodental [v] for /w/ as in ‘wanted’, are both transfer effects. Much more prevalent are issues with the vowels. /ei/ and /ou/ are monophthongized in words like ‘way’ and ‘do’, one of the most obvious transfer effects between English and German. Some unstressed vowels retain full value rather than being reduced to schwa. Many of these effects are triggered by a non-native prosody, specifically a Germanic over-stress on unstressed syllables, which also results in consonantal effects such as inappropriately aspirated /t/. These serve as very hearable markers of non-nativeness.<sup>8</sup>

There is of course a lot of the phonetics that is native-like, and Dietrich is undoubtedly closer to a native pronunciation than most of the rest of the cast, including Jannings. Many realizations of potentially difficult sounds are often

**Table 2:** Count of non-nativisms in Dietrich's performance of 'Falling in love again' in *The Blue Angel*, 1930 (tokens in parentheses are intermediate)

Feature	Example	N
Vowels:		
Full vowel for schwa	to, wanted	10
Monophthongization of /uu/, /ei/	do, to, always, flame	12
Vowel shortening	been, moth	2
Unrounding/lowering to [a]	burn	3
Consonants:		
Mis-aspiration	to, wanted	5
Fortis /d/	around	1
Affrication	their	1
/w/ unrounded/labiodental	what, wanted	3 (+1)
Hyper-clear postvocalic /l/	help	(2)
Prosody:		
Weak syllables over-stressed	I just can't help it	4
<b>Total</b>		<b>41 (44)</b>

acceptably native-like – /w/ and 'th'. Some of the postvocalic /l/s are velarized, although others sound hyper-clear.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, she shows little difficulty on 'help', the word which was to cause her so much angst in the filming of *Morocco*. The overall result is that Dietrich produces a pronunciation of this song which is hearably marked as non-native for the English-speaking listener, especially by the prosody and its phonetic repercussions.

In *The Blue Angel* Dietrich would not pass as American to Americans, nor as British to the British, and this is therefore at odds with the character's biography of being a native speaker of American English. From his later handling of her for *Morocco* and subsequent films, von Sternberg clearly regarded the inaccurate referee design of her linguistic production in *The Blue Angel* as potentially fatal if continued in future, American-oriented films. He later specified the sounds he identified as problematic:

... guttural pronunciation with rolling *r* sounds, *v* substituted for *w*, *ch* for *j*, *b* for *p* and *z* for *s*. My fears were not based on any fantasy, for in filming the English version of *The Blue Angel* simultaneously with the German, I had witnessed the facial contortions and the wrestling match with the tongue that went with the most elemental sounds that came from her lips. (von Sternberg 1966: 245)

From this catalogue, the last three features are either not present in the song or these pronunciations of them do not occur, although we have noted some labiodental /w/s. The two intervocalic /r/s in 'around' are in fact true English approximants not labials. Since her pronunciation did not in fact jeopardize comprehension, von Sternberg's perception was therefore more a sociolinguistic one of a *degree* of otherness which would not be supportable in the American

market. It was precisely this which had shortened Jannings' career in Hollywood, as it did those of other silent-movie stars whose accents were either too non-native or too 'uneducated' to survive the shift to sound film (Baxter 2010: 84). Von Sternberg was not going to let this happen to Dietrich.

## 5. DIETRICH IN AMERICA

Dietrich's first-ever encounter with an English-language environment was when she landed in New York in April 1930 bound for Hollywood. Paramount presented her for press interviews, and live on radio: 'Her English, tolerable in Germany, now sounded unsteady and heavily accented, and she spoke slowly, translating everything before she spoke' (Spoto 1992: 65). Once she was under von Sternberg's control in Hollywood a few days later, he kept her away from the press until her English improved. He schooled her daily in English, refusing to speak German and using only English to her (according to Riva 1993: 86), which often reduced her to tears. He corrected her grammar and pronunciation (1993: 86) – including most infamously, while she was lying on a stretcher after fainting from the heat during filming of a desert scene for *Morocco*. Later in her life, Dietrich gave contradictory assessments of her own English (as of much else):

I fully mastered English in the following years [after arrival]. (Dietrich 1989: 59)

To be sure I still don't have a perfect mastery of English (to the degree that I would like), but I'm familiar with it now. (Dietrich 1989: 60)

According to her autobiography Dietrich remained identified with German, and Riva endorses her felt distance from her second language:

In English, my mother always felt like a foreigner, disguise was therefore easier. Later, rarely did the real Dietrich emerge when performing in English. Mostly, that language called forth the acquired persona. (Riva 1993: 70)

English was first a performance language for Dietrich, and only later a conversational language. From 1930 she lived largely in an English-speaking milieu, but it is plausible that German remained her 'identity language'. While the grammar of her English became near-native over the years, she retained an identifiably Germanic phonology.

### *Language and role in Dietrich's Hollywood films*

From 1930 Dietrich made six films with von Sternberg in Hollywood. The femme fatale persona began with the first, *Morocco*, and was crafted and enhanced over the following productions. The sadomasochistic strand in their relationship worsened until their partnership ended in 1935, apparently at his insistence. Often in these films and throughout her career, she was cast as a performer, especially a singer.

Dietrich played some roles where no biographical cover was provided for her accent, as in *Pittsburgh*, a 1942 war propaganda piece with John Wayne, and Hitchcock's 1948 thriller *Stage Fright*. There is no warranting (such as reference to immigration history) within these films for her character's accent. But most of her roles have a biography that justifies a non-native accent. Often she played a German – *Dishonored* (1931), *Blonde Venus* (1932), *The Scarlet Empress* (1934), *A Foreign Affair* (1948), *Witness for the Prosecution* (1958), *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961). But Dietrich's accent identified her as coming from what by the late thirties was an 'unpopular' nationality (Spoto 1992: 175), hence the absence of German-character roles between the early thirties and late forties.<sup>10</sup>

The gap in overtly German roles from the late 1930s was filled by characters with other-language histories: Spanish (*The Devil is a Woman* 1935); Russian (*Knight without Armour* 1937); French (*Destry Rides Again* 1939); and even Middle Eastern (*Kismet* 1943). The diverse nationalities and linguistic backgrounds were in principle very divergent linguistic referees. If targeted, they would in reality result in very differently non-native phonologies, but it is unlikely that Dietrich attempted to do French-English or Russian-English accents. This will have mattered little. We know that it often takes very little linguistic shift for a referee-designed accent to be convincing to an audience which is not from the referee community (Bell 1992). For the American audience at this period, any kind of 'European English' was probably adequately represented by German English. Closer acquaintance with the German accent, and its association with enemies and villains, was built later by post-war films and cartoons. Linguistically, a generalized exotic Other was adequate for the needs of the star, studios and audiences (Lawrence 2007). In Referee Design terms, these performances may not have been accurate but they were successful, and they enregistered non-native English as part of her persona.

## 6. DIETRICH ON STAGE

While Dietrich's film work stuttered, it was on the live stage that she built her performance career from the 1940s to the 1970s, and this is where we turn for another analysis of 'Falling in love again'. She had recorded the song twice in 1939. What is striking in both of these is not so much the non-nativeness but the low voice register. In sharp contrast to the 1930 film soundtrack, throughout the song she produces the husky baritone for which she is famous – particularly on the 'Falling' strophe/chorus, where the low notes almost take it below her range. The voice quality is so extreme and consistent, it would sound like a parody if produced by someone else.

She toured frequently with live shows from 1942 in service of the U.S. war effort, and eventually presented a one-woman show for the troops which included 'Falling in love again'. After the war the live performances lapsed again until



in 1953 she did a three-week season in Las Vegas. It initiated two decades of touring the world with a live show. She had a notable season in London at the Café de Paris (1954), which was recorded. This version of 'Falling in love again' is less consistently baritone than the 1939 recordings. There is some low register and *Sprechstimme*, but the phonetics are as expected. Burt Bacharach became her musical director from 1958, shaping her stage performance in much the same way as von Sternberg had shaped her for films.

The structure of the shows remained fairly constant – in some aspects, formulaic – across 20 years. She planned and oversaw all aspects herself, meticulous and perfectionist. Costume was the centrepiece. For her 1953 Las Vegas shows Dietrich had created a costume that consisted of a foundation covered by a neck-to-foot body stocking which gave the impression she was ethereally slim, and naked apart from the sequins sewn on to it. The costume altered and enhanced each year, but its appeal was the same (photo at <http://www.imdb.com/media/rm1699059712/nm0000017>). Soon she would add a costume change during the show into tie, tails and top hat. This reproduced the androgynous look for which she had been known in Berlin, directly referencing her cabaret costume from *Morocco*, and gave her a base for performing songs written for men.

The core repertoire of songs remained constant – her film songs and others with which she had become identified, plus new numbers under the guidance of Bacharach. The musical setting was agreed and rehearsed: Bacharach said that she never changed a single note in the dozen years they worked together (Lawrence 2007). The stage anecdotes were pre-set – her being 'discovered' for *The Blue Angel*, filming experiences, wartime performances. The spoken patter between songs was formulaic and nearly verbatim. Sudendorf's (2008) *Hörbiographie* records similar renditions of a song introduction across three countries and nine years, and Bach (2007: 35) chronicles her rehearsing with a new band in Los Angeles to precisely the same formula.

If the patter was formulaic and the music set, the performances of the songs were also likely to have been stable, including the pronunciation. She usually closed with 'Falling in love again', rightly regarded as her personal signature tune. As her voice aged, its range and accuracy reduced still further, and she relied increasingly on *Sprechstimme*, to the extent that she could scarcely be said to be singing much of the time – as unkind critics tended to comment: 'her voice deficiencies were neatly offset by her rather radical costume' (Spoto 1992: 243).

### ***'Falling in love again' again: 1964***

In 1964 Dietrich had a triumphant season at the Queen's Theatre, London, which also produced a recording on its closing night (URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SYI5GaSKZcw>). In performance terms, this is a vastly different rendition to 1930. It is self-consciously stylized: Dietrich holds pauses, lengthens

notes, varies her pace between fast and slow. She uses a lot of *Sprechstimme*, the stereotyped low/husky voice is there only occasionally. The accompaniment is solo piano (played by Bacharach).

Table 3 displays the non-nativisms in Dietrich's performance of 'Falling in love again' during this show. The contrast to 1930 is immediately obvious – and unsurprising. She has now been living and working in a largely English-language environment for well over 30 years, and this is an English audience. What was in 1930 temporary, short-term referee design has long been long term. Several non-native features present in 1930 have disappeared altogether – lowering of the NURSE vowel, the rogue fortis /d/, /th/ affrication, and unrounded or labiodental /w/. Unsurprisingly, these were the relatively infrequent features in 1930. The features that still show in 1964 are at much lower levels than 35 years before, and are much less phonetically extreme or obvious. Most of the non-native full vowels or monophthongizations are gone, although a couple of unstressed syllables are still receiving full vowel quality. There is one vowel shortening on 'not' – the same vowel but not the same word as 'moths' in 1930 (where unsurprisingly Marlene had struggled with the [θs] cluster). There remain a couple of aspiration issues on /t/, and a slightly clearer /l/ than expected.

Overall, whereas in 1930 there was a total of 41 tokens (plus 3 intermediates) that registered as non-native, in 1964 there are only 3 fully non-native tokens, plus 11 intermediates. Most salient perceptually is the absence in 1964 of any non-natively even stress patterns, which triggered so many phonetic effects in 1930. These mis-stressings are gone, and with them the most salient marker of non-nativeness. The 1930 obtrusive level of non-nativeness has therefore

**Table 3:** Count of non-nativisms in Dietrich's performance of 'Falling in love again', Queen's Theatre, London, 1964 (tokens in parentheses are intermediate)

Feature	Example	N
Vowels:		
Full vowel for schwa	falling, wanted	2 (+1)
Monophthongization of /ei/ (no /ou/)	blame, flame	(3)
Vowel shortening	not	1
Unrounding/lowering to [a]	-	0
Consonants:		
Mis-aspiration	can't help	(2)
Fortis /d/	-	0
Th affrication	-	0
/w/ unrounded/labiodental	-	0
Hyper-clear postvocalic /l/	help	(2)
Prosody:		
Weak syllables over-stressed	-	0
<b>Total</b>		<b>3 (11)</b>

vanished, and in its place we have an accent that is audibly but mildly non-native. On listening, it is noticeable that the 11 ‘slight’ tokens in particular would probably pass below the level of perception *if they occurred in isolation*. They would be within native-speaker tolerance as one-off occurrences, but it is their repetition that registers. More than 30 years of English speaking and performing have naturally worn away most of Dietrich’s non-nativism, but she retains an edge of it still. She is still distinctive – but not too distinctive. This style is enregistered as hers, but below I will problematize the interpretation that this should continue to be classed as outgroup referee design.

Table 4 charts the possible American pronunciations for six features in the 1964 performance. Because of the change of line from ‘What’s a girl to do’ to ‘What am I to do’, some tokens are different between the 1930 and 1964 tables. There is little shift in the ‘Americanization’ of Dietrich’s English compared to 1930: it has not occurred, despite her being based in the U.S. for most of the intervening 35 years. The two tokens of ‘falling’ are unrounded although not much lowered, and there is a suggestion of unrounding/lowering on one token of ‘what’, and of flapping on ‘what am’. But there are no postvocalic /r/s, no monophthongizations on ‘I’, no fronting of ‘can’t’ despite the opportunities. She in fact registers slightly fewer American features than in 1930, and her accent does not at all ‘sound American’ to an overall listening.<sup>11</sup> Dietrich did not in fact like American English or want to speak it, despite some declarations she made to the contrary. She wrote in her autobiography: ‘I had done my best to imitate this accent; however, I never succeeded, thank God’ (1989: 108). It appears that she was largely right.

In video footage of a 1972 performance, when Dietrich is 71 years old, she is again accompanied by solo piano, joined by orchestra for the last two strophes. She varies the tempo even more extremely than 1964, and is almost entirely in *Sprechstimme*. The voice is not strong. Since 1970 she had been having physical difficulties during performance. Increasing leg and alcohol problems led to a

**Table 4:** Actual out of potential Americanisms in Dietrich’s performance of ‘Falling in love again’, Queen’s Theatre, London, 1964 (tokens in parentheses are intermediate)

Feature	Tokens	American N	Total N
Postvocalic /r/	never 2, cluster, their, burn	0	5
Medial /t/ flapping	wanted 2, what 2	(1)	4
BATH fronting to [æ]	can’t 3	0	3
PRICE monophthongization to [a]	my, I 9	0	10
LOT unrounding/lowering to [ɑ]	what 2, wanted 2, was	(1)	5
THOUGHT unrounding/lowering to [ɑ]	falling 2, always	2	3
<b>Total</b>		2 (+2)	30

final on-stage fall in Sydney in 1975. A reviewer observed that she looked like a camp impersonation of herself (the comment pointing up the degree to which her persona had been enregistered): 'Without a doubt her show is the bravest, saddest, most bittersweet concert I have ever seen' (Riva 1993: 752). She retired to her apartment in Paris, and from 1979 remained in bed. But the voice was still active. She spent hours on the phone, and in almost her last 'appearance' (a celebrated 1984 documentary by Maximilian Schell), allowed only voice recording, no filming.

Marlene Dietrich died in 1992, having refused a return to Germany. In 1960, during her only concert tour there, she had been almost equally pilloried as a traitor as she was hailed as a heroine. The alienation from Germany began to find some resolution with her burial in Berlin – 'the return of the Blue Angel', the news magazine *Der Spiegel* called it. In due course her huge archive became the core of the Filmmuseum, which is located in the heart of the Potsdamer Platz, which is the centrepiece of post-wall Berlin. As Kosta (2009: 141ff.) details, Dietrich in death now serves the cause of Berlin and Germany reunified.

## 7. REFERENCING DIETRICH

Enregisterment requires a style to be exposed more widely than just the individual performer, and in this section I deal briefly with the cultural circulation of Dietrich referencing since 1930. Examining in detail how later performances have referenced the song and the style would require a paper of its own, nor does space allow me to engage here with the substantial literatures on such cultural intertextuality and allusion (e.g. Bakhtin 1981; Dentith 2000). But brief consideration is needed to round out Dietrich's enregisterment as a characterological figure in the wider culture.

To be imitated, you have to be well known; to be parodied, you have to be very well known. Dietrich was the object of both within a year of *Der Blaue Engel*. Zarah Leander was a Swedish-born actor/singer who modelled herself on Dietrich and was groomed as the star of the German film industry when Dietrich refused approaches from Nazi Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels to return home. Leander covered 'Ich bin von Kopf bis Fuß' in 1930/31 – in Swedish, and with a musical arrangement similar to the *Blue Angel* original. Dietrich – specifically her legs – was equally quickly caricatured in German cartoons, including by the Nazis (Kosta 2009). Since then she has been arguably one of the most imitated and parodied performers on the planet. A pop-academic analysis of fashion icons calls her 'the most imitated woman in the world' (Fowler 1996).

We can recognize that there is a gradient of levels in referencing a star, ranging from the identical to the partial, and varying in their degree of comic and polemic (Dentith 2000). What we may call 'impersonation' involves a (more or less) serious attempt to do again what a star has done, to re-animate that celebrity, most evidently in the widespread Elvis impersonator phenomenon. Performers who wish to 'do' Dietrich can use appearance: make up the face, imitate the

hairstyle, display the legs, wear the costumes. Or they can use the voice – low register and non-native pronunciation will call her up. Ideal is to have both appearance and voice. But they can probably get by without the appearance: low register + non-native pronunciation means Dietrich, even without a costume to suit. But if the appearance is there and the voice is wrong, that is no Dietrich.

Such impersonations are evidence of the iconic status of Dietrich and her voice but, while fascinating, they are less interesting for my purposes than some other forms of allusion. Two of the best known are parodies:

- Carol Channing in a stage act (late 1950s/early 60s), singing 'Ich bin von Kopf bis Fuß'. Dietrich herself saw the act when Channing was playing Las Vegas and was spotlighted at the end as she swept out of the venue (Spoto 1992: 267). Channing refused her request to drop it (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1imjF1LxoQ0>).
- Madeline Kahn in the cabaret act of Lilli von Shtupp, the high point in Mel Brooks' *Blazing Saddles* (1974), singing 'I'm tired' (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oLTJsFY9fXw>).

Both performers have the full Dietrich appearance: face, hairdo, costume and a display of legs. Channing does the androgynous voice quality throughout. While Channing sings and speaks both German and Germanic English, Kahn does only Germanic English. They reference the accent mainly through [w] for /r/ – a feature of Dietrich's spoken but not sung English. There is some [v] for /w/ – not, in reality, Dietrich's usual 'mistake', but it references the Germanic accent in general. Also some unaspirated /t/ and monophthongal /ei/, which were features of Dietrich's. German language or accent is an essential part of these performances – they would not be Marlene without it – although it is undoubtedly the visual representation that keys the character even before she opens her mouth. The linguistic parodies involve a variable mix which targets both Dietrich's specific pronunciations, e.g. her 'lifelong difficulty with the letter R' (Spoto 1992: 131), and a more generalized German-English stereotype such as [v] for /w/. To this Channing adds an English-based stereotype of German-language pronunciation through a parodic hyper-form of [x:::] for [ç] in 'nichts'. The referee, then, is sometimes specifically Dietrich herself, at other times a national stereotype – and sometimes the two coincide. The allusions sometimes to the individual and sometimes to the 'national' accent are the linguistic equivalent of the distinction between *specific* parody (of a particular work), and *general* parody (of a genre, Dentith 2000: 7).

A third well-known performance referencing Dietrich is polemical but not comic:

- Helmut Berger in drag as the centerpiece of Visconti's film on the Nazi takeover, *The Damned* (1969). He sings Lola's second song from *Der Blaue Engel*, 'Kinder, heut' abend da such' ich mir was aus/I'm looking for a man, a real man' (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JpvL9dApWPE>).

Berger also has the full Dietrich appearance and androgynous voice, with all the cross-nuancing that the cross-dressing signifies – including ‘I’m looking for a man, a real man’. He performs only in German, so we can make no English-accent observations. His performance, like Kahn’s, is sited within a film and takes its meaning within the plot and characterization of a conflicted elite industrialist family in early 1930s Germany.

It may be significant that none of these performances directly does ‘Falling in love again’ in English. Any performance of the song cannot avoid its allusion to Dietrich’s ownership, and invites an introduction that explicitly acknowledges her. ‘Falling in love again’ has been covered by numerous singers over the decades, including Billie Holiday (1940), Sammy Davis Jr. (1962), Doris Day (1962), Linda Ronstadt (1984), and – movingly – by Roxy Music’s Brian Ferry (1999) (all are on YouTube). None of these cover versions shows any hint whatever of either baritone register or non-native pronunciation (although Davis and Ronstadt have as much trouble pronouncing ‘moths’ as Marlene did). The musical styles are as varied as the singers, but none references Holländer’s original *Blue Angel* arrangement. It seems that what makes Dietrich’s voice quality and non-nativeness available for parody simultaneously eliminates its potential use in subsequent ‘straight’ performances. This abstinence from low register and non-nativeness even applies to performers in the German tradition. Today’s leading interpreter of the 1920s/30s Weimar Republic repertoire, Ute Lemper, sings the song in several musical styles and multilingually, but with no reference musically or linguistically to Dietrich.

More generally, the song, the film and Dietrich herself form a semiotic cluster that has been widely circulated in later cultural allusions. The outcomes include entire films or plays about Dietrich, Lola and ‘Lili Marleen’ (her other signature song). Dietrich self-refers to *The Blue Angel* in her 1948 film *A Foreign Affair*. *The Blue Angel* was remade (badly) in the fifties. There is a biographical play, and a cinematic biography by Dietrich’s grandson. A musical is said to be in preparation at the time of writing. Among all this, the leading visual allusion is to Dietrich in her ‘Falling in love again’ pose, leaning back with her leg crooked and exposed. The aural allusion is to what was, after all, always her song from the start.

We can see then that the enregistration process has involved widespread referencing of Dietrich’s performance style through voice quality and pronunciation, as well as visual cues. Interestingly, it has also required, in ‘straight’ renditions of her signature song, strict *avoidance* of those characteristics. She is not a referee to be imitated in others’ cover versions of ‘Falling’, but rather one to be noted and avoided. The avoidance is an acknowledgement that the iconic style she brought to the song is simply too specifically individual to be available for reference or imitation without crossing into parody. The necessity of this avoidance is perhaps an even greater tribute to the Dietrich icon than the many imitations.

## 8. CONCLUSION

As a celebrity of the past, but one whose iconicity remains in active circulation and cultural dialogue with the present, the case of Marlene Dietrich offers an enlightening perspective on the sociolinguistics of contemporary performance. Many of the performers presented in this theme issue are stars, and in Dietrich we can see features of their stardom writ large. The reach of stardom is also much wider than those who have attained it. It has become arguably the ultimate goal of performance in a mediatized, digitalized and globalized environment. Stardom is the hope that powers both participants in and audiences for the many television shows which offer potential celebrity to the obscure performer. Voice is one of the prime paths to this goal, as evidenced by the success and subsequent international celebrity of singers Paul Potts and Susan Boyle through the U.K. programme *Britain's Got Talent*.

For the female performer, one persona that is available is the femme fatale. We are now in a position to re-visit this characterization of Dietrich, and our understanding of the processes of reference and enregistration involved. Her 1920s stage and silent-film roles were typecast, with Gancarz (2007) claiming that she was intentionally modelling herself on Greta Garbo, the already iconic Hollywood femme fatale. But her breakthrough role of Lola Lola in *The Blue Angel* was by no means pure femme fatale. Lola did have many of those characteristics as listed earlier in this paper, but she is no exotic Other. She is American to the Americans, German to the Germans. She lacks the crucial 'unknowability' which Hanson and O'Rawe (2010: 1) posit as central to the femme fatale. Rather, she makes the core of her being clear in the song itself – 'from head to foot I am set for love'.

From 1930, however, Dietrich was signed to Paramount and von Sternberg, who undertook an intentional process of creating a femme fatale star. He gave her roles which fitted that script in detail, with the elements of mystery, unknowability and otherness. The result was the slender, exotic, disdainful figure of the six films they made together in Hollywood. And in the process Dietrich lost the actuality and potentiality of Lola and 'Ich bin von Kopf bis Fuß'. As she wrote herself:

*The Blue Angel* had been something altogether different, the role of an ordinary, brazen, sexy and impetuous floozie, the very opposite of the 'mysterious woman' that von Sternberg wanted me to play in *Morocco*. (Dietrich 1989: 67)

Appearance was central to the image. Von Sternberg oversaw her visual remake, slimming her down from the slightly plump face and figure of *The Blue Angel*. He sculpted presentation of her face with makeup and lighting so that she was famous in the U.S. through publicity stills before release of any of her films. Dietrich herself always largely controlled her own costuming and dress and, through her male attire, quickly made the risqué *garçonne* style popular in America. Eventually she would carry the skills learned from von Sternberg's

staging and lighting into her own live shows, along with the appearance they had crafted. The image was most visible in her stage costumes from the 1950s on, with their astonishing body stockings and thousands of sequins. But where other stars such as Garbo might expose generous surfaces of torso, Marlene maintained a level of physical invisibility and unknowability. She rarely showed anything but her legs, which had an identity almost of their own – General Patton's World War II code name for her was 'Legs' (Alter 2007). When the legs could no longer sustain her, and she could no longer maintain the visual image, she retired into reclusive isolation.

Such visibility and its maintenance is a common dimension of the celebrity performer, and a sociolinguistics of performance needs to take account of this modality in order to come to an encompassing understanding of its object. Voice and language intertwine with the visual in a package of semiotic features which make up a characterological figure such as Dietrich. Pollock (2010) suggests that the original femmes fatales were the Sirens of Homer's *Odyssey*, and that their allure was located in sound rather than sight. It was the *singing* of the sirens that drew men to their death not their appearance, and indeed one of the early femme fatale films had been Theda Bara's *Siren's Song* (1919). But before the coming of sound film, the persona could be based only in appearance: she had no voice.

Marlene Dietrich was the first to give the femme fatale a voice. With the release of *Morocco* in November 1930, the otherness of the character was inscribed in her non-native English, the fitting vehicle for the persona's exotic non-Americanism. Dietrich established and carried forward the image of the femme fatale through the 1930s, and then on into her stage acts from the 1940s. She was both the original and the enduring voice of the femme fatale. Two things gave her the edge over her contemporary and rival, Garbo. First was longevity. Garbo made her last film in 1941 and then retired into reclusiveness. At the same time Dietrich was embarking on a second, thirty-year career on the live stage. But a second difference lies in the voice – not in its quality (Garbo's was also non-native and low register) but in its circulation and exposure. Garbo had been a star of the silent era, remaking the look of the femme fatale but initially not requiring a voice. Dietrich, however, was a singer, a vocal performer, long before and after her main film appearances. The voice was her distinctive.

The engine of enregistration as one of Agha's 'characterological figures' is repetition of salient features through a succession of cognate performances. Repetition is the requirement and the bane of the successful live performer. The more stellar, the more repetition: audiences expect to see and hear what they know and love. Repetition is what Dietrich did, especially on stage. All commentators agree on the changelessness that she brought to her shows from the 1950s to 1970s. Performances were pre-planned and rehearsed in meticulous detail (Bach 2007), down to the formulaic shape and wording of the between-song discourse. Repetition was also central to the performances themselves. Dietrich sang 'Falling' and other numbers in her core repertoire



literally thousands of times. This involved a constant re-quotation of self, maintaining sameness as well as introducing judicious novelty. Dietrich is an extreme example of the formulaic, quotative and repetitive character of most performance (see Bauman 1986).

In addition to repetition, the icon must be refracted and circulated in the referencing it receives in the wider culture. Dietrich's appearance (especially dress) was constantly referenced and imitated, occasionally parodied. But as Dentith notes, even parody functions to preserve what it targets (2000: 36), so the parodies reinforced Dietrich's iconicity as well as reflecting it. And as we saw above, voice quality and pronunciation were not imitated except in mannered self-awareness, particularly parody – an outcome which underlines and reinforces the uniqueness of her voice and its central place in her iconization.

Dietrich's voice, as we have seen, had two distinctives: its low register, and its non-nativeness. I have shown how from the thirties it trended towards both increasingly baritone quality and decreasingly non-native pronunciation. The low register became a trademark. It was obviously in part a functional shift, along with *Sprechstimme*, as her always limited vocal range continued to reduce with age. But it was also a distinctive trait which served the mystery and androgyny of the femme fatale, in harmony with her frequently masculine clothing. That the low register attracted and held its own audience is clear from Lawrence's study of Dietrich's voice (2007). Piqued by the 1952 Hemingway article that provides the epigraph at the head of this present paper, Lawrence found parallel accounts from several other males who confessed to the appeal of Dietrich's voice played on the phonographs of their youth. Notable was that these memories were all of Dietrich singing in *German*, and that the listeners found their lack of comprehension of the lyrics enhanced the appeal of her otherness. The central dimension to which they were responding was therefore not non-nativeness but her voice quality, which could operate in either language.<sup>12</sup>

In English, of course, non-nativeness also came into salient play. I have interpreted this initially as a form of Referee Design. Her performance in *The Blue Angel* is outgroup referee design, targeting native English pronunciation, specifically American. Her actual achieved pronunciation was markedly non-native, and there was little evidence of Americanism. It was also short term, specific to the performance of a role filmed in a non-English environment. Our next encounter with Marlene's English is the incident with which I began this paper, filming of the pronunciation of 'help' in *Morocco*. This represents a clash between short and long-term referee design. After only a few months in the U.S., Dietrich is still in short-term mode, but von Sternberg is explicitly looking to the long-term establishment of a star.

I suggest that from there on and increasingly, Dietrich's orientation will have become a long-term one. She was in an English-speaking environment. English had become an everyday language as well as a performance matter, and the referees were no longer an absent outgroup but had become the actual, present audience. From 1930 she began a long phonetic journey towards nativeness,

moving on a trajectory which I have exemplified from the 1930 *Blue Angel* performance to the 1964 stage rendition of 'Falling in love again'. But at a certain level she stops, fully fluent but still with a tinge of non-native pronunciation. This may well have been as far as she could go – after all, most non-native speakers of a language retain some markers of their accent. Perhaps also, maintaining strong personal identification as a German, she wished to continue to signal that in her accented English. Regardless of the mix of ability and intent, non-nativeness was functional for her persona. She kept a lilt which was no threat to comprehension but set her apart. Her accent, according to Lawrence (2007: 84), 'functions as a marker of difference, a guarantee of her "otherness"'. Technically this may be 'inaccurate' pronunciation, but if so, it is a successful inaccuracy, one which achieves its purpose of registering otherness. Rather than a falling-short, we can better regard non-nativeness as increasingly a linguistic resource on which she drew to highlight her difference. The phonetics of performance involves features like over-shoot and mis-realization (see Bell and Gibson's Introduction), and it is precisely such variations that stretch linguistic boundaries and create new styles. Non-nativeness and its enregistration was Marlene's particular form of the star performer's need to display individual distinction.

Dietrich could not help being non-native, but she did not want to sound American. She takes on almost no distinctives of American English from her environment. This appears to represent a refusal to become too local, too ordinary, which is consonant with the ambivalent attitudes she expressed towards American culture and American English. By the time she could have been absorbing American in the early thirties, her accent persona had already been established. 'She never loses her accent. Once formed, the icon "Dietrich" never varies', Lawrence writes (2007: 84). Overall, then, there was a mix of referees for her – native speakers of English, both American (largely ignored) and British (surprisingly targeted) and, arguably and eventually, her own German-accented English.

This brings us back to enregisterment. In dealing with the successive sets of 20th century 'exemplary speakers' of RP mentioned earlier, Agha (2003) fails to note an important distinction: these are quantitatively and qualitatively very different configurations from each other. The 'characterological figures' or referees are said to have been, first, public school graduates in the early 20th century, of whom there must have been hundreds of thousands; then British army officers in the 1930s, who will have numbered in the high thousands; and then BBC announcers in 1970s, totalling some dozens. The pool of exemplars narrows exponentially as the century progresses, until it can even be said to reside in single persons – Agha mentions the Queen, but a figure such as the newscaster Walter Cronkite fulfilled the role for decades in the U.S.

Honed down to the person of a single individual, 'characterological figure' becomes effectively identical with an icon. Dietrich was an individual who captured a persona. This process had two dimensions for her, and arguably for other star performers. First, the boundary between self and role becomes fluid

and blurred. Dietrich lived the femme fatale persona in her own life. There had been a consonance between her own 1920s lifestyle and Lola's, and from 1930, her way of life was a fit for the roles in the von Sternberg films: she lived the femme fatale. Von Sternberg could maintain with justification (1966: 227): 'I gave her nothing that she did not already have. What I did was to dramatize her attributes and make them visible for all to see.'

Secondly, reflexivity is a core aspect of the theorization of performance, including its sociolinguistics (see Bell and Gibson's Introduction). The icon demonstrates the ultimate in reflexivity in her performances. Dietrich's target – both in her general image and in her voice – became *herself*. Many commentators confirm the immense attention and labour Dietrich devoted to maintaining her established persona on all fronts: 'A monument made famous by transcending time' (Spoto 1992: 251) – 'trapped in her own legend' (Noel Coward, in Spoto 1992: 251) – 'a remarkable piece of artifice' (Cecil Beaton, in Spoto 1992: 282) – 'her mind is filled with the creation of a legend as she conceives it' (Maximilian Schell, in Spoto 1992: 298). This may be interpreted as a particular case of ingroup referee design in which a speaker's target becomes a heightened version of her own individual linguistic production. From the 1930s to the end of her career forty years later, we may say that Marlene Dietrich's referee was, in fact, herself.

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## NOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 12th New Zealand Language and Society Conference, Auckland University of Technology, 2010. I am greatly indebted to Dick Bauman as reviewer, and to the Journal's editorial team for their perceptive and detailed feedback on the paper – Dave Britain, Andy Gibson and Monica Heller. Many thanks to Bettina Müller for her editing of the German abstract. The remaining insufficiencies are mine. Most of the performances mentioned in the paper are available on YouTube, and I give the URLs of analyzed performances in the text.
2. The narrative and commentary on this incident are drawn from detailed accounts in the autobiographies of Dietrich (1989: 67–68) and von Sternberg (1966: 245–251), and in Maria Riva's biography of her mother (1993: 89–91).
3. I have not been able to clarify precisely what von Sternberg's capabilities were in English. He moved to and fro between Austria and the U.S. as a child, and the few seconds of his recorded English that I have heard indicate fluency but with non-native accent features. Perhaps, then, not the aptest pronunciation model for what he wanted of Dietrich.
4. The current approach which I am developing to language style, especially the stylization of performance, is the 'Sociolinguistics of Voice'. In its pre-theoretical form, this involves a taxonomy of dimensions: Physicalities, Localities, Varieties, Multiplicities, Dialogicalities, Performativities and Identities (e.g. Bell 2008).
5. Writing about Dietrich's life is perilous because of the amount of contradictory information available. She herself developed accounts that differed widely according

- to circumstance, including those that clashed with evident reality (such as birth year). Even established biographies differ in what they claim or endorse. I have attempted to present only information that seems reasonably well verified unless I note otherwise. I do not attempt to reference each piece of information to its source.
6. See Praver (2002), Petro (2007) and Kosta (2009) for further detail on the film's production, the songs and their performance, and the role of music in the film.
  7. Robert Liebmann, Carl Winston and others are also credited with the English version by different sources.
  8. While German and English are both stress-timed languages, German unstressed syllables retain slightly more stress than their English equivalents. When this is carried across into English, it results in production of full vowels which natives would have reduced to schwa. See Whitworth (2002).
  9. Dark non-prevocalic /l/ was less widespread in British English circa 1930 than it is today, so Dietrich's target would not have been unequivocally a dark rather than clear /l/. That said, she did produce some velarized variants alongside others which can only be described as hyper-clear, at least to modern ears. The High German that Marlene spoke does not have dark /l/, although some dialects do.
  10. Dietrich seems not to have experienced wartime anti-German prejudice in the U.S. She had always been outspokenly anti-Nazi, and became a U.S. citizen before the outbreak of war in Europe. She threw herself into the U.S. war effort from early 1942, undertaking four national tours and selling more war bonds than any other star (Horowitz 2008: 229). Most conspicuously, for the last year of the war she toured entertaining American frontline troops, including during the invasion of Germany.
  11. This chart does not, however, pick up one feature that I hear as an Americanism: 'been' is pronounced with a stressed [bm] for [bi:n]. Although this was and is routine British English, it reaches my (non-British, non-American) ears as American – perhaps because of use in popular singing. For Marlene it was an American adoption: it was absent in her 1930 singing but present in the 1939 recording as well as in 1964.
  12. One of the aspects of the Sociolinguistics of Voice that I am developing (e.g. Bell 2008) addresses the functionality of singing in languages that audiences do not understand.
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