

Gordon C. Waite, "The Evolution of Dialogue in Early Sound Film: How the Motion Picture Industry Found its Voice Without Losing its Soul," *intersections* 11, no. 1 (2010): 164-174.

## ABSTRACT

By the 1930's, the use of sound technology in Hollywood films had become the norm. But it was not a simple matter of adding voices to the moving picture. Filmmakers learned almost immediately that older forms of dialogue from literature and the theatre did not work in the medium of film. Audiences who had been raised on silent film, and who had become accustomed to a form of storytelling based on spectacle rather than verbal exposition, demanded new forms of dialogue that did not hinder the illusion of film, but which conveyed meaning with concision and style. This essay discusses how film dialogue evolved in the early sound era, and how censorship forced screenwriters to create even more sophisticated modes of dialogue that placated social reformers, while retaining the undercurrents of sensuality that were integral to classical Hollywood narratives.

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# The Evolution of Dialogue in Early Sound Film

## How the Motion Picture Industry Found Its Voice Without Losing Its Soul

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The use of sound recording in moving pictures did not seem a foregone conclusion in the Silent Era; if fact, it seemed a novelty—one that was resisted by the studios for purely economic reasons, spurned by artists such as Charlie Chaplin for aesthetic reasons, and feared by actors whose careers had been built upon being seen and not heard. But resistance was futile. Technological advancement, and audience demand for sound, made it clear that “talkies” were here to stay. Sound in film did more than just bring human voices to talking heads; and it did more than recreate classic literature for the film audience. Sound recording energized the careers of witty verbalizers like Mae West, W.C. Fields, and Groucho Marx; similarly, stars like Cary Grant and Katherine Hepburn became renowned and recognized as much for the sound and inflection of their voices as for their glamorous personas and stunning physiques; and it created a demand for screenwriters and directors with a knack for punchy dialogue, especially when stronger enforcement of the Code of Production presented challenges to filmmakers of how to make “sex comedy without the sex.”<sup>1</sup>

The early years of sound were a period of experimentation and innovation with dialogue. Early screenplays often relied on the talents of writers from the worlds of literature and the stage, who tended to use lofty, polysyllabic, or verbose language. For example, in describing F. Scott Fitzgerald’s early screenplay for *Red headed woman* (1932), producer Irving Thalberg complained, “Scott tried to turn the silly book into a tone poem.”<sup>2</sup> Many felt that there was a need to limit the number of words in Hollywood films (850 was floated by studio executives as a reasonable number of words), that pictorial action or characterization should take precedence over speech. In the words of film critic Philip K. Scheuer, “talk is still the lazy man’s prop in the writing of motion pictures.”<sup>3</sup> Each genre began to develop its own lexicon, in order to distill language down to its most essential

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Maultby, “It Happened One Night: Comedy and the Restoration of Order,” in *Film Analysis*, eds. Jeffrey Geiger and R.L. Rutsky (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), 225.

<sup>2</sup> Anita Loos, *Cast of thousands* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1977), 113.

<sup>3</sup> Philip K. Scheuer, “Hollywood’s Vocabulary Threatened With the Axe,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 18, 1933, A1.

words. During the making of *Vampires of Prague* (1935), for instance, a “lexicon of fear” was developed—writers wanted to create a “subconscious sense of fear” in their audience, by favoring words such as “dank,” “corpse,” “phantom,” “demon,” “ominous,” and so on.<sup>4</sup>

For comedy writing, vaudeville was tapped early on by the film industry. *The jazz singer* (1927), the first successful talking picture, featured the amusing stage banter of Al Jolson. Many others would follow. The most successful comedy team during this period was the Marx Brothers. Ironically, the Marx Brothers did not seem cut out for film, at least not to Norman McCloud, director of *Monkey business* (1931), who complained of the chaos that swirled around their madcap universe. “The Marxes are fine boys, but they are not inclined to overwork,” he said, “and too, the brothers, or most of them, have no idea what they are going to do in the next scene. They would rather figure out situations and ‘gags’ as they go along, which doesn’t make the job of director an easy one.”<sup>5</sup> True, gags were an important element of the Marx Brothers’ comedy. Harpo, despite his extraordinary musical talent and an array of sound effects, still had both feet firmly planted in the Silent Era, and relied almost exclusively on visual gags for comic effect. “However,” Chico explained, “the spoken word is the most popular form of comedy today.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, both Chico and Groucho excelled in the art of the spoken word. Groucho’s brain, said McCloud, “works at lightning speed and his casual conversation out of character is often as funny as his famous wise-cracking on the stage or screen.”<sup>7</sup> Often, Groucho’s witticisms would be inserted into the dialogue. Would these lines have come from Groucho or from one of the writers credited for the script?:

Lucille: Come here, brown eyes.

Groucho: Oh no, you’re not going to get me off this bed.

Lucille: I didn’t know you were a lawyer. You’re awfully shy for a lawyer.

Groucho: You bet I’m shy. I’m a shyster lawyer.

Lucille: Well then, what do you think of an egg that would give me...

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<sup>4</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, “Film’s Dialogue to Have Most Terrifying Words,” February 26, 1935, 13.

<sup>5</sup> John Scott, “It’s Not So Funny to Direct Them,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 20, 1931, B11.

<sup>6</sup> Chico Marx, “Reading From Laugh to Riot,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 10, 1932, J3.

<sup>7</sup> Scott, B11.

Groucho: I know, I know. You're a woman who's been getting nothing but dirty breaks. Well, we can clean and tighten your brakes, but you'll have to stay in the garage all night.<sup>8</sup>

Though puns and double entendres were a common feature of Groucho's everyday patter the Marx Brothers' films were field-tested extensively before being brought to the screen. A host of contributors were involved, much to the chagrin of McCloud, who complained of the brothers' motley entourage of "gag writers." "We got rid of them," huffed McCloud, "For really they were just in the way. Few knew anything about writing funny things for the screen."<sup>9</sup>

Thus, a tension arose between how things were done in vaudeville versus what "worked" on the screen. The Marx Brothers had their own proven system for creating stories, jokes, and gags, which involved a good deal of trial and error, whereas the film industry's survival depended on creating finished products in an economical fashion. Under Irving Thalberg at M.G.M., the team's films became more structured, less chaotic than their films at Paramount. *A night at the opera* (1935) successfully combined the comedy team's gift for spontaneity with producer Irving Thalberg's drive toward systemization. But the follow-up, *A Day at the races* (1937), may have suffered from Thalberg's desire "to turn the pattern of his success into a self-conscious formula."<sup>10</sup> Thalberg, who died while *races* was in production, was a fan of the Marx Brothers, but Louis B. Mayer "disliked Groucho, and let it be known that he was not a fan of the comedian's iconoclastic style."<sup>11</sup> The studio system, as exemplified by M.G.M., was an authoritarian regime in many ways. Vaudeville, an art form which thrived on live performance, variety, and audacious anti-authoritarianism, provided some of the earliest and most successful voices to early sound film; but in return, sound cinema may have sounded the death knell for vaudeville, as systemization became more rigid, as the need for more economical dialogue grew more urgent, and as movie theaters began to replace vaudeville theaters around the country.

The Marx Brothers, and Groucho in particular, have remained icons through the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Like Charlie Chaplin, Groucho has one of the most recognizable faces in American cinema, with his painted on mustache, ever-

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<sup>8</sup> Norman Z. McLeod, S. J. Perelman, Will B. Johnstone, Arthur Sheekman, and Thelma Todd, *Monkey Business*, Marx Brothers silver screen collection (United States: Universal Studios, 2004)

<sup>9</sup> Scott, B11.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Adamson, "Seventeen Preliminary Scripts of 'A Day at the Races'," *Cinema Journal* 8, no. 2 (1969): 9.

<sup>11</sup> Groucho Marx, *The Essential Groucho: Writings by, for, and about Groucho Marx* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 72.

present cigar, and googly eyes peering out through wire-framed glasses. But Groucho, unlike Chaplin, had a voice that is just as recognizable as his face. With sound, for the first time in history, a movie star could be recognized as a “whole,” which included not only motion and sound, but inflection of voice, timbre, verbal “ticks,” and speech patterns. Groucho’s and voice evoke both the image of Groucho and the type of character he played—undefatigably charming con men, charlatans, and womanizers. Similarly, it is notable that some of the cinema’s most beloved and enduring stars—Cary Grant, Jimmy Stewart, Katherine Hepburn, John Wayne, James Cagney, and Bette Davis, to name a few—possessed instantly recognizable and sometimes quirky voices. This is an important factor to consider when thinking about the development of dialogue throughout film history. Since, as Tino Balio notes, “the screenplay, sets, costumes, lighting, and makeup of a picture were designed to enhance a star’s screen persona,” it is logical to assume that it worked both ways: that a star’s native personality enhanced the diegesis of his or her films to some extent.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, screenwriters would need to consider not only what a fictional character might say in a given situation, but also as how the Hollywood star—a film’s “most treasured asset”—might naturally say it.<sup>13</sup>

John Wayne’s laconic drawl, Jimmy Stewart’s flustered stammer, Katherine Hepburn’s aristocratic chirp (and later her wobbly warble), and Cary Grant’s vaguely British lisp all became part of the diegetic landscape of the films they starred in, integral to the characters they played, and part of the image that had been constructed for them—John Wayne the unbent warrior, Jimmy Stewart the sensitive idealist, Katherine Hepburn the strong-willed Yankee socialite, and Cary Grant the debonair but standoffish lady’s man, etc. While some film actors, especially those who had made their careers in the theater, most notably British actors like Alec Guinness and Lawrence Olivier, excelled in the art of masquerade, the real game in Hollywood was product differentiation, or the ability of an actor to establish a distinctive place in the firmament of stars. This is why an actor may seem to be “playing himself” in film after film. Even the random head-nod of an actor could find its way into a script, as screenwriter Anita Loos recalls in her autobiography. Having already decided to cast Jean Harlow as the scheming homewrecker in *Red headed woman*, Irving Thalberg and Loos met with Harlow to get a feel for her personality. Both were impressed with Harlow’s “gently sardonic attitude,” and were satisfied that Harlow’s sense of humor was sufficient to tackle the difficult character she was to play. Then,

<sup>12</sup> Tino Balio, *Grand design: Hollywood as a modern business enterprise, 1930-1939*, History of the American Cinema, Volume 5 (New York: Scribner, 1993), 144.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 143,

“As Jean breezed out of the office,” says Loos, “she stopped at the door to give us a quick bright little nod; a gesture I wrote into the script and still look for every time I see that old movie.”<sup>14</sup> After the success of *Red headed woman*, Anita Loos went on to write another script “tailored especially for Miss Harlow” (Kingsley “Ambition”), another clear indication that, for Thalberg, Loos, and many others, “plots grow out of character,” and character often grows out of the actors themselves.<sup>15</sup>

The one individual who stood out above all others in this regard was Mae West. Like Groucho Marx, Mae West was in many ways indistinguishable from her public persona. Both had enjoyed success as iconoclasts in the east coast theater and vaudeville scene. Both were masters of wit who specialized in the art of the sexual double entendre, and were always quick with the comeback to any interviewer’s question. When asked if she approved of free love, West responded in typical form, “Not for myself—any more than I do of free lunch for myself.”<sup>16</sup> But while Groucho’s contributions to Marx Brothers screenplays were limited, West wrote her own screenplays and dialogue. “I don’t like to write plays,” said West, “but I do so that I may have vehicles best suited to my personality. There are certain roles I portray better than others. Why not play them?”<sup>17</sup> Prior to her Hollywood career, West wrote several plays dealing with sexually taboo subjects—*The drag* (1927), *The pleasure man* (1928), and most notoriously, *Sex* (1926), which, because of its allegedly indecent content, landed her in jail for eight days. In her writing and acting, Mae West had made a career as a sort of crusader for sexual liberation, and often had to defend herself from pointed criticism of moral arbiters of the day.

In *I’m no angel* (1933), a film written by Mae West and directed by Wesley Ruggles, she puts *herself* on trial, so to speak, in the courtroom scene near the end of the film. Actually, it’s her estranged fiancé Jack Clayton (Cary Grant) who is being sued by Tira (West’s character) for breach of promise, having broken off their wedding engagement after receiving false information about Tira from the vindictive Slick Wiley (Ralf Harolde). Jack’s defense strategy is to cast aspersions upon Tira’s “rather colorful past,” by proving that she has “been on friendly terms with several men,” many of whom have been called as witnesses. In cross examination, Tira destroys each of these men one at a time,

<sup>14</sup> Loos, 118.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>16</sup> Grace Kingsley, “Hobnobbing in Hollywood with Grace Kingsley,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 6, 1933, A7.

<sup>17</sup> Muriel Babcock, “Mae West Calls Rough Drama Clean,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 22, 1929, B11.



Image Source:  
Wikipedia

Mae West and Cary Grant. *I'm no Angel*, 1933.

by pointing out the double standard to which she is being subjected. The first man has had five wives, and was married when he met Tira. The second man had proposed marriage to Tira, and had given her several expensive gifts before she broke off the relationship to become engaged to Jack, allegedly because he had more money. In the words of the witness, Tira “played” him “for a good thing.” But his complaints hold no water, since he was engaged to another woman at the same time he was buying gifts for Tira. And when his fiancé went to ask Tira to break it off with him, she complied. “So,” Tira asks him, “what are you cryin’ about?” By this time, the all-man jury is in stitches, and the judge has become smitten with Tira, who has been eyeing him kittenishly. An attempt to get Tira’s maid (Gertrude Howard) to incriminate her fails to pan out for the defense, because the maid can’t remember Tira mentioning any other man but Jack during their courtship. In fact, says the maid, “You say that you could never love a man like you love him.” Finally, Slick Wiley testifies on the witness stand, claiming that Tira went for Jack because she “was always lookin’ to hook some guy with a lot of dough.” But Slick, in cross examination, is browbeaten by Tira into admitting his own criminal past. When the defense lawyer objects that Tira is harassing the witness, she responds, “Who’s harassing who? I’m just asking for a square deal, that’s all. I’m just asking good, honest, and intelligent people not to take the word of an ex-convict against a good, honest, and innocent woman!”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> All dialogue quoted from *I'm No Angel*, featured in this essay: Mae West, Cary Grant, Edward Arnold, Gregory Ratoff, Wesley Ruggles, Harvey Brooks, Gladys Du Bois, and Ben Ellison, *I'm no angel*, Mae West the glamour collection (Universal city, California: Universal, 2006).

In a real sense, this is the real Mae West speaking through the character she created. West's stock and trade was her extraordinary sex appeal, and her active interest in a variety of men was widely talked about, so naturally, questions about her propriety were raised on a regular basis. But West was game. When asked, for example, if there had been a return to the "staid morals of generation ago," West replied, "How do you know that their morals were so staid a generation ago? If you think so, just remember those midnight hay rides—and the Police Gazette!" But West may have had deeper motives for exposing the hypocrisy she saw all around her. Always the critic of outmoded social mores, her views were hardened by the hard luck stories of the young women she met in jail, for whom she felt a keen sympathy—vagrants, junkies, and prostitutes ravaged by syphilis. "If I hadn't started writing plays," she said, "I think I could have gone the other way and wasted my whole mentality and life on sex"—ironic, since *Sex* (the play, if not the act) was the very reason she had been locked up in the first place.<sup>19</sup> On her early release, the warden declared, "Mae West is a fine woman—and a great character."<sup>20</sup> Still, when considering the warden's glowing assessment, it's hard not to think of the judge in *I'm no angel*, who melts as soon as Tira starts batting her eyes at him, the same man we see leaving Tira's apartment soon after the trial. Mae West flaunted her sexuality, but at the same time, she always kept it mysterious. Was she doing the "right thing"? Tira's answer: "Show me a woman who can do any better." In 1930's Hollywood, there weren't any.

Films like *I'm no angel* and *Red headed woman* played a key role in the development of dialogue in the 1930's, as morality watchdogs became more alarmed at the bold sexuality depicted in these films. Both films featured women who gladly accepted, without any moral qualms, attention and gifts from a succession of married men. Tira, for her part, goes out of her way to demonstrate her underlying innocence in all of her affairs. Red (Jean Harlow), on the other hand, goes so far as to shoot her husband with a pistol when she can't get what she wants from him; yet in the end, she is not held responsible for her actions—in fact, in the final scene Red is shown playing the same game, seducing rich old men for their money. There may be a "moral" to the story in *Red headed woman*, but for groups like the Legion of Decency, the lack of moral accountability was alarming. Pressure from these kinds of groups forced filmmakers to sublimate

<sup>19</sup> Emily Wortis Leider, *Becoming Mae West* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1997), 170.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.



the sexual content of their films in order to more fully comply with the 1930 Code of Production.<sup>21</sup>

The “screwball comedy” is one manifestation of this attempt at sublimation, and Frank Capra’s *It happened one night* is one of the best and earliest examples of this genre. In this film, the leading man doesn’t foolishly succumb to the irresistible charm of tramps and vamps. Rather, Peter Warne (Clark Gable), constructs a metaphorical barrier between himself and Ellie Andrews (Claudette Colbert), a blanket he calls the “Wall of Jericho,” which separates their hotel beds as they flee across the country, away from Ellie’s paternalistic father. Peter’s interest in Ellie is strictly economic. As a newspaper reporter, he just wants Ellie’s “story.” But the sexual tension grows nonetheless, for Peter and Ellie are both very attractive young adults who have been forced to live in close proximity to each other for several days and nights. In order to displace the undeniable eroticism of the situation, a mutual hostility is created between the couple. Antagonism between two sexually compatible adults accounts for much of the wonderfully comic dialogue in the typical screwball comedy. In the end, the audience knows that the “Wall of Jericho” will eventually come down, when everything returns to its “proper” place, that is, when the couple finally legitimizes their attraction to each other in matrimony.

Screwball comedy, “one of the rare instances in which critics attach some aesthetically beneficial effect to censorship” gave birth to some of the most innovative dialogue in the early sound era, as directors and screenwriters began to develop their own distinctive styles.<sup>22</sup> Howard Hawk’s *His girl Friday* (1940), a preeminent specimen of this genre, was adapted from a successful play entitled *The front page*, written by Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur. The authors, at Hawk’s bequest, changed the sex of one of the leading characters from male to female in the film version, thus creating an opportunity for sexual tension between Hildy Johnson (Rosalind Russell) and her ex-boss (now ex-husband) Walter Burns (Cary Grant). In some ways, moments of dialogue are just as racy as Mae West’s dialogue in *I’m no angel*, but the banter between Hildy and Walter is so rapid-fire, and the action is so hectic, that only the most attentive viewer can follow it all. As one critic wrote: “the lines are all cute if you can hear them, but you can’t hear many because everyone is making too much noise—the

<sup>21</sup> John Belton, *Movies and mass culture*, Rutgers depth of field series (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 137.

<sup>22</sup> Richard Maultby, “It Happened One Night: Comedy and the Restoration of Order,” in *Film analysis*, eds. Jeffrey Geiger and R.L. Rutsky (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), 226.

audience or the players themselves.”<sup>23</sup> By contrast, in *I’m no angel*, Tira says to a male suitor, “I like sophisticated men to take me out.” When the man responds “I’m not really sophisticated,” Tira quips “You’re not really out yet, either,” there’s really no question about what she means by “out,” because she takes a good long time to look him up and down. *His girl Friday* never lingers long enough for the innuendo to sink in. Moreover, in typical screwball fashion, the antagonism between the couple gets more emphasis than their mutual attraction. But consider these lines:

Walter: Well, well... how long is it?

Hildy: How long is what?

Walter: You know what. How long is it since we’ve seen each other?

Hildy: Well, let’s see... I spent six weeks in Reno, then Bermuda... About four months I guess. Seems like yesterday to me.

Walter: Maybe it was yesterday, Hildy. Been seeing me in your dreams?

Hildy: Oh, no, Mama doesn’t dream about you anymore. Walter, you wouldn’t know the old girl now.

Walter: Oh, yes I would. I’d know you anytime, anyplace, anywhere.<sup>24</sup>

The exchange is full of sexual innuendo. The savvy listener can easily surmise what “it” is, what “dreams” consist of, and what it means to “know” Hildy “anytime, anyplace, anywhere.” However, though this is one of the more relaxed moments in this frenetic film, the erotic nature of the dialogue doesn’t immediately reveal itself. Rather, the two antagonists seem to be sneering rather than leering at each other, and the antipathy rarely lets up throughout the entire film. As in *It happened one night*, their union as a couple is deferred until the very end, when it’s finally obvious that the two were made for each other.

Dialogue styles are as varied as the filmmakers and screenwriters who create them, and can take on the flavor of the genre for which they are written (e.g., the use of “terrifying words” in horror movies). Spoken lines are influenced by both external factors, such as societal pressures to limit overt representations of crime and sexuality—and internal, including the speaking styles, mannerisms,

<sup>23</sup> Frank S. Nugent, “The Screen in Review,” *The New York Times*, January 12, 1940. 20.

<sup>24</sup> Howard Hawks, Charles Lederer, Cary Grant, Rosalind Russell, Ralph Bellamy, Gene Lockhart, Helen Mack, Porter Hall, Ben Hecht, and Charles MacArthur, *His girl Friday* (Culver City, CA: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2006).

and other peculiarities of the individual actors. As the star system became an important basis for the promotion of films, and as the star's value as a marketable commodity increased, so did these personal characteristics become part of the star's package. While it's probably true that Cary Grant never actually said his trademark line, "Juday, Juday, Juday" in any film, the fact that this myth has persisted so long is evidence that the *manner* in which he spoke is just as important as the actual roles he played.

Gordon C. Waite graduated from the University of Washington in the Spring of 2010. He majored in Comparative History of Ideas and Comparative Literature, with an emphasis on film. Gordon was nominated by Department of Comparative Literature to be their candidate for the Dean's Medal, and was honored to be a finalist for that award. Currently Gordon and his wife Susan are taking time out to spend time with their newborn baby girl, Vera.