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## Schwa-deletion in the Dialogues of 1930s French Films<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

My aim in this article is to identify whether schwa deletion was a social or stylistic marker in the 1930's. The videos and transcripts of five films provide the corpus on which this analysis is based: *Fric-frac*, *Circonstances atténuantes*, *Le Jour se lève*, *La Règle du jeu* and *Hôtel du Nord*. Though these video recordings are samples of not natural but artificial language, these films are some of the only material available for linguistic analysis in that period beside radio broadcast and music hall songs. I will first quantify the deletion of schwa in word-initial position in the film dialogues and in a second stage focus on schwa-deletion in pre-consonantal “je” in order to establish whether these features of pronunciation can be used to differentiate the lower and upper group speeches.

### 1. Introduction

My aim in this analysis is to identify the level of schwa-deletion displayed by the speakers in a 1930s film corpus. I intend to establish whether the dropping of schwa correlate with social membership. I will first quantify the deletion of schwa in word-initial position in the film dialogues and in a second stage focus on schwa-deletion in pre-consonantal “je.” In a third stage, I will analyse the contexts in which this feature has occurred. The five 1930s films which I have chosen to analyse provide a very interesting source of data, because they offer a fairly stereotyped vision of a society divided roughly into two distinct social classes: one which I shall call “lower group” and the other “upper group.” This division, which is deliberately simplified, will allow me to study the relationships which are established between the two groups: these groups, in 1930s French films,

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<sup>1</sup> The following revised research was conducted in the course of my doctoral dissertation on “The Representation of Parisian Speech in the Cinema of the 1930s” (University of St Andrews, Scotland 2000). I am very grateful to Dr W. J. Anderson for her help with the revision of this article.

co-exist to offer the spectator a representation of what has come to be called the “social voyeurism” of the pre-war period.

## 2. A social classification of the characters

For this research, a corpus of five French films dating from the 1930s has been assembled: *Hôtel du Nord* (1938), *Fric-frac* (1939), *Circonstances atténuantes* (1939), *Le Jour se lève* (1939), *La Règle du jeu* (1939). I chose these films above all because each film presents the interaction of a variety of Parisian speakers from different social classes, and depicts the contrast between the ‘vernacular speech’ of the proletarian speakers and the ‘standard speech’ of the upper-group characters.

To help us to assign a category to each speaker in the films I have used the following stratification adapted from the INSEE (*Institut National de la Statistique et des Etudes Economiques*) classification:

- A. Professions libérales et cadres supérieurs
- B. Cadres moyens
- C. Employés
- D. Contremaîtres, ouvriers qualifiés
- E. Ouvriers spécialisés, manœuvres

Among these five occupational groups, it is possible to distinguish three broad social classes: lower class (Category E), middle class (Category B, C, D) and upper class (Category A). By “lower class”, I mean people who earn low wages, mostly by manual labour. By “middle class”, I mean high school graduates, semi-professionals and white collar workers. By “upper class”, I mean aristocrats, the nobility and well-to-do people who hold no job but live on private incomes. The jewellery employees in *Fric-frac* with most probably modest salaries are middle group, whereas the public prosecutor in *Circonstances atténuantes* and Robert de La Chesnaye, the aristocrat of *La Règle du jeu* can be said to be upper group. Because the majority of the characters in my films fall into the lower group, a division of the remaining ones into middle group and upper group is not methodologically convenient. So, in my study, middle-class and upper-middle class speakers will be put together into one social class which I shall refer to as that of the upper group. Another category should be added to my subdivision: *floaters*. Such characters waver between the upper and

lower groups. Examples of this category are Marcel, Valentin, Octave and Edmond.

Most speakers are placed clearly in either the upper group (the *bourgeoisie*) or the lower group (the *classe populaire*). There is a danger of circularity in my classification. By classifying *a-priori* the characters in each film into the upper and lower groups and establishing my own rather *ad hoc* social categories, I end up with a picture of Paris society divided into two social groups. Parisian society in the 1930s was naturally much more complex than this and my bi-partite division is an oversimplification. However, it is still valid for my purposes, as the script-writers of the films clearly blur all social distinctions other than upper and lower.

#### Film 1: *Fric-frac*

The employees of Mercandieu's jeweller's shop encapsulate the category which INSEE refers to as "employés" (Offord 1990: 66). The upper-group characters are Renée and Marcel, although Marcel is better classified as a floater. The lower-group characters are made up of two leading figures Loulou and Jo who belong to milieu of petty thieves.

#### Film 2: *Circonstances atténuantes*

The upper-group characters are former prosecutor Monsieur Gaëtan and his wife Madame Nathalie Le Sentencier and the lower-group characters, dominated by male figures, are the innkeeper Bouic and a group of small gangsters known as Môme de dieu, Cinq de Canne and Marie. I will in this study concentrate on Marie and Bouic's speech, which is the most stereotypical.

#### Film 3: *Le Jour se lève*

Valentin is the upper-group figure. He is a cabaret dog trainer who is said in the film to have a degree in philosophy. His educational background is well-rated by Clara, who on several occasions is filled with admiration for his manner of speaking. The lower group is made up of three main characters: François, a factory worker, his homonym Françoise, a flower-seller from a modest background, and Clara, an assistant to a cabaret artist. Both François and Françoise were brought up in an orphanage.

#### Film 4: *La Règle du jeu*

The study of this film is made difficult by the high number of characters. I will concentrate on the most stereotyped characters. Robert La Chesnaye and Geneviève de Marras are the upper-group characters. Marceau is the lower-group Parisian. Octave, a friend of Robert and Jurieu who belong to the upper group, is more of a floater between the groups.

#### Film 5: *Hôtel du Nord*

In this film, the upper-group characters are Renée and Pierre. The lower-group characters are a prostitute Raymonde and former pimp Edmond.

### 3. The corpus

The language used in 1930s French dialogues does not constitute naturally-occurring speech, but is a stylized form which present a caricature of what both script-writers and actors consider to be salient features of vernacular speech. Indeed, although being artificial, this corpus is far from completely fictitious. A “constructed” language borrows from natural conversation to create its own singular speech. Features are presented in higher frequency that they would normally occur in natural language. The data that I will analyse is the result of a collective creation partly of a script-writer, partly of the director and partly also the actors who not only play roles but bring in a particular stress, intonation and accent. As such, film languages represent a genuine and very valuable source of information which has its own status and can be used as linguistic material.

#### FILM 1: *Fric-Frac*

Adapted from a play by E. Bourdet, performed in the Théâtre de la Michodière, and starring Arletty, Michel Simon and Fernandel, *Fric-frac* was released at the beginning of the Second World War in 1939. The story of *Fric-Frac* is set in Paris. **Marcel** (Fernandel) a honest man and an employee in a jeweller’s shop, has become infatuated with **Loulou** (Arletty), a girl from the milieu of petty criminals. By his acquaintance with gangsters, Marcel gets initiated to their colloquialisms and their moral and intellectual values. With her friend **Jo** (Michel Simon), Loulou takes advantage of Marcel’s working in a jewellery store and of his gullibility to organise a break-in. The break-in fails, when Mercandieu, the owner of the

jewellery shop and his daughter **Renée** (Hélène Robert), who is in love with Marcel, burst in unexpectedly.

FILM 2: *Circonstances atténuantes*

The French comedy entitled *Circonstances atténuantes* presents a variety of Parisian speakers ranging from the upper-middle class to the lower-working class. Adapted from a novel by M. Arnac, *Circonstances atténuantes*, starring Michel Simon, Suzanne Dantès and Arletty, was also released at the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939. Suzanne Dantès (**Madame**) is the stereotype of the pedantic and coquettish Parisian snob while the other female character (**Marie**), played by Arletty, typifies, as in *Fric-Frac*, the outspoken and coarse-mannered whore with a heart of gold. In *Fric-Frac*, Michel Simon normally plays the part of a gangster, but in *Circonstances atténuantes*, he embodies the other extreme of the social ladder, a respectable and highly sophisticated lawyer (**Monsieur**). Among the secondary characters, one should note the presence of Andrex (born in 1907 in Marseille) as Môme de dieu and Dorville who plays the part of **Bouic** the innkeeper. Although the bourgeoisie is the target of ridicule in the film as the “stereotype of moral rectitude” and social injustice (Hayward 1993: 185), it eventually comes out on top to show that righteousness prevails and that crime does not pay.

FILM 3: *Le Jour se lève*

Carné's film scripted by Jacques Prévert opens with a shooting. **François** (Jean Gabin) barricades himself into his attic room. Chain-smoking cigarettes, he recollects events that led him to kill. François is a sandblast worker in a foundry. By way of flashbacks, we return to the time when François was in love with **Françoise** (Jacqueline Laurent), until the climactic moment when, abandoning himself to fatalism, he shoots **Valentin** (Jules Berry). The film encapsulates the pessimistic mood that pervaded France in the 1930s.

FILM 4: *La Règle du jeu*

*La Règle du jeu* is one of Jean Renoir's most famous films. On the eve of the Second World War, the aviator André Jurieux (played by Roland Toutain) is welcomed triumphantly back to Le Bourget airport, after crossing the Atlantic ocean. Jurieux intends to win back the love of Christine (Nora Grégor) who is married to Marquis **Robert** de La

Chesnaye (Marcel Dalio). However, when Jurieux arrives in Paris, he is very sad because Christine is not there. Christine has refused Jurieux's advances, as she prefers the Marquis Robert de La Chesnaye's aristocratic life with its privileges. A rabbit shooting is organised by the Marquis at their property named "La Collinière" which results in a series of love intrigues among servants and masters. A common friend, **Octave** (Jean Renoir) manages to have Jurieux invited to the shooting party. The Marquis's mistress, **Geneviève** du Marras (Mila Parély) with whom he strives to break up, is also invited. Things get out of control when Christine discovers that her husband has a lover and that **Marceau** (Julien Carette), a former poacher newly employed by Robert as his domestic, is flirting with Lisette.

#### FILM 5: *Hôtel du Nord*

In *Hôtel du Nord*, a young couple **Renée** (Annabella) and **Pierre** (Jean-Pierre Aumont) hire a room for a night at the Hôtel du Nord in Paris, near the Canal Saint-Martin. They wish to die together in a suicide pact, but after shooting Renée, Pierre lacks courage and runs away. Another guest at the hotel, Paulo, who has himself called Monsieur **Edmond** (Louis Jouvet), a former procurer, rescues her. Monsieur Edmond lives with a prostitute called **Raymonde** (Arletty). When Renée leaves the hospital, she is employed as a waitress in the Hôtel du Nord. Monsieur Edmond falls in love with her, but Renée cannot help thinking of Pierre.

Table 1 presents all the characters investigated in alphabetical order, listing their profession in the films and the name of the actors. Lower-group speakers will appear in bold in this study.

	Film	Actors	Profession
<b>Blin</b>	<i>Fric-frac</i>	R. Génin	jeweller's assistant
<b>Bouic</b>	<i>Circonstances atténuantes</i>	Dorville	innkeeper
<b>Clara</b>	<i>Le Jour se lève</i>	Arletty	assistant
<b>Edmond</b>	<i>Hôtel du Nord</i>	L. Jouvet	former pimp
<b>François</b>	<i>Le Jour se lève</i>	J. Gabin	worker
<b>Françoise</b>	<i>Le Jour se lève</i>	J. Laurent	florist
Geneviève	<i>La Règle du jeu</i>	M. Parély	Countess
<b>Jo</b>	<i>Fric-frac</i>	M. Simon	petty criminal
<b>Loulou</b>	<i>Fric-frac</i>	Arletty	petty criminal
Madame	<i>Circonstances atténuantes</i>	S. Dantès	unknown
<b>Marceau</b>	<i>La Règle du jeu</i>	J. Carette	servant
Marcel	<i>Fric-frac</i>	Fernandel	jeweller's assistant
<b>Marie</b>	<i>Circonstances atténuantes</i>	Arletty	prostitute
Mercandieu	<i>Fric-frac</i>	M. Vallée	jeweller
Monsieur	<i>Circonstances atténuantes</i>	M. Simon	prosecutor
<b>Octave</b>	<i>La Règle du jeu</i>	J. Renoir	unsuccessful artist
<b>Pierre</b>	<i>Hôtel du Nord</i>	J.-P. Aumont	artist
<b>Raymonde</b>	<i>Hôtel du Nord</i>	Arletty	prostitute
Renée	<i>Hôtel du Nord</i>	Annabella	hotel maid
<b>Renée</b>	<i>Fric-frac</i>	H. Robert	bank clerk
Robert	<i>La Règle du jeu</i>	M. Dalio	Marquis
Valentin	<i>Le Jour se lève</i>	J. Berry	animal trainer

**Table 1.** Classification of characters by profession

#### 4. Methods

The following results are based on my auditory perception of schwa-deletion. Each statistical exercise poses technical problems and is open to criticism. Due to auditory difficulties, my findings are prone to unwitting errors of interpretation (Blanche-Benveniste and Jeanjean 1987). There is always a risk that the analyst may misunderstand or mishear a particular phoneme. The deletion of schwa is often so difficult to perceive than even

after hearing the tapes several times one cannot be absolutely certain that one's perception is 100% correct. Instrumental techniques could have been conducted in a phonetic lab or using computer software,<sup>2</sup> but the poor quality of some of my recordings makes “a phonetically trained ear” (Milroy 1987) more reliable than transcriptions made using voice recognition or other technical instruments.

## 5. Schwa-deletion

Variable deletion of schwa in French is a complex topic which has been investigated in depth, though the problems raised have not yet been completely resolved. There is some uncertainty about the phonetic nature of schwa. In the 70s, the quality of the /ə/ vowel was investigated. Dausès (1973) and Walter (1977) showed that Parisian teenagers tended to pronounce the mute -e as /ø/ or /œ/. Sequences like “ample rang” and “en pleurant” or “elle se le demande” and “elle seule demande” were pronounced identically by the informants investigated. Price gives [ə] full phonemic status, but argues that “there is a case for considering that it is not in fact a phoneme but merely an allophone of /ø/ or /œ/” (1971: 25).

Most works are concerned with the question of the retention and elision of schwa. Schwa-deletion is in some contexts categorical and in others variable. My concern here will be with variable deletion of schwa. Tranel (1987: 88–89) distinguishes three potential sites for schwa in French:

- (1) Final schwas at the end of polysyllables:  
e.g. “chemises”, “parlent”, “table”
- (2) Initial schwas in the first syllables of words:  
e.g. “fenêtre”, “chemise”, “petit”

The nine monosyllabic words “je,” “me,” “te,” “se,” “ce,” “le,” “ne,” “de,” and “que” also belong to this category.

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<sup>2</sup> J. Durand's international project entitled “La phonologie du français contemporain: usages, variétés et structure” used a software called “comparateur” in his quantification of schwa-deletion (see <http://www.univ-tlse2.fr/pfc/compar.htm>).



(3) Internal schwas in the middle syllables of words:

e.g. “vendredi”, “fixement”

- In standard French, final schwas are not generally pronounced except in special cases.
- Deletion is variable for initial schwas: e.g. “s(e)rais”, “f(e)nêtre”, “j(e) l(e) vois”, “p(e)tit”
- Deletion is categorical for internal schwas when the schwa follows a single pronounced consonant as in “samedi” /samdi/, “grandement” /grãdmã/, “phonétiquement” /fõnetikmã . / When schwas are preceded by more than one consonant, the schwa is retained according to “la loi des trois consonnes”: e.g. “brusquement”, “vendredi”

Gadet notices that the dropping of schwa is “le trait le plus fréquemment souligné de l’usage populaire” (1992: 37). She then adds that the tendency is for non-standard speakers throughout France to “maintenir les impairs et faire chuter les pairs” (ibid.) and for standard French speakers to do the reverse:

Non-standard

e.g. “tu peux te l(e)ver”

“je m(e) le d(e)mande”

Standard

e.g. “tu peux t(e) lever”

“j(e) me l(e) demande”

In continuation of this observation, Gadet adds that schwa is generally retained in contexts such as CəC\_C: e.g. “je n’fais”, according to the *Loi des trois consonnes*, except for sequences of the type “qu’est-ce que c’est” and “quelque chose” pronounced [kɛskse] and [kɛlk ʒoz].

In the 1930s, schwa-deletion was a social marker. Documents of that period are scarce. Songs by musical-hall singers are amongst the rare audio testimony one has of that period. Although like films they are “artificial” data, they still inform us on the phonetic features characteristic of Parisian vernacular. Texts of Aristide Bruant’s songs give us indications of the recurrence of schwa-deletion in Parisian vernacular speech:

Malgré que j'soye un roturier  
 Le dernier des fils d'un Poirier  
 D'la rue Berthe,  
 Depuis les temps les plus anciens  
 Nous habitons, moi-z-et les mains  
 A Montmerte.  
 L'an mil-huit-cent-soixante et dix  
 Mon papa qui adorait l'trois six et la verte  
 ("A Montmartre" in Antoine and Martin 1999: 309)

Maurice Chevalier's song titles also give numerous examples of schwa-deletion ("Moi, j'fais mes coups en dessous", "Un p'tit américain", "Y'a d'la joie"), which show how common this phenomenon was in Parisian low-status French.

While the studies conducted in the 50s and 70s (Malécot 1955, Peretz-Juillard 1977) on Parisian speech had shown that young speakers would often delete schwas in all phonetic contexts investigated, Hansen notices at the time of her survey that mute -e tended to become stabilised between two consonants (1994: 46). In a more recent study (1997), she observes the tendency in educated Parisian speech, especially among females aged 20-25, for "schwa-tagging", in other words to use a pre-pausal schwa in word-final position:

e.g. "c'était Pierre" [setɛ pjɛrə] (see Armstrong and Unsworth 1999: 135).

For Léon, the "intrusive schwa" is characteristic of "une parlure, chic, moderne, jeune" (Léon 1987: 112). It is sometimes seen as a phatic feature which conveys the same function as filled pauses of the type "euh", "bon" and "ben." Hansen (1997) finds it is associated with certain intonation patterns and suggests that it is quite closely connected to discourse (see Fónagy 1989: 244; Armstrong 1993: 75).

In Northern French, on the whole, "schwa is deleted at higher rates in informal (...) French" (Armstrong and Unsworth 1999: 132). In Southern French, schwa-deletion is much less widespread than in the North and has been studied to establish social and gender differentiation (Diller 1978, Taylor 1996, Armstrong and Unsworth, 1999: 132), higher schwa-deletion rates being observed in the informal speech of upper groups and younger female informants who tend towards the prestige of the Northern norm (Armstrong and Unsworth 1999: 132).

### 5.1 Analysis of schwa-dropping in a representative extract from *La Règle du jeu*

In the first instance, I will quantify the deletion of variable schwa per speaker in a small section of *La Règle du jeu*. My intention is to establish whether the deletion of schwa correlates with social groups. I will essentially be concerned with the deletion of initial schwas in order to observe whether lower-group speakers in the films drop the “impairs”:

e.g. “chemise”, “je ne veux pas”

Analysing schwa-deletion in every context is time-consuming, not to say impossible, and my general impression in previous studies I conducted was that the various contexts were not very different. To make this study feasible, I have limited it to schwa-deletion of initial schwas which I consider representative of the film corpus. Jacques Durand deems that “initial schwas are certainly a factor that will differentiate varieties and varieties within varieties” (personal communication: 2003). Certain types of undeletable schwas have been excluded from my quantification for example in “serions”, “le onze” etc (see contexts in Hansen 1994: 26–27). Armstrong and Unsworth (1999) adopt the following formula:

$$\frac{\text{Actual deletions} \times 100}{\text{Potential sites for inclusion}}$$

The following tables indicate schwa-deletions rate (%) and number of *tokens* (N). I will in this study calculate the percentage of retention immediately on the basis of the percentage of deletion (e.g. 30% deletion = 70% retention). I will not consider all the sites where deletion could potentially occur, but focus on the first thirty occurrences of schwa-retention or deletion per speaker. As suggested by L. Milroy (1987: 134–136), thirty *tokens* per speaker is a statistically significant sample.

The extract I am using first of all to illustrate the dropping of mute “e” in my corpus of films is a dialogue between Marceau, the proletarian speaker, Schumacher, the gamekeeper and Robert de La Chesnaye, the upper-group speaker. I am here counting all instances of retention and deletion of initial schwas per speaker in this given passage.

	actual deletion
Robert	14%
<b>Marceau</b>	43%
<b>Schumacher</b>	29%

**Table 2.** Schwa-dropping in an extract of *La Règle du jeu*

Marceau is the speaker who deletes schwas most in initial positions (e.g. “un p’tit lapin,” “alors j’m’occupe,” “j’dis pas non,” j’n’peux pas,” j’vous remercie,” j’aurais dû l’voir”). This statistical exercise bears only upon a small section of *La Règle du jeu*, but it indicates that in this film at least schwa-dropping is used to build up a picture of linguistic differences between the upper group of characters and the lower group.

## 5.2 Analysis of schwa-dropping in each film

The purpose of the statistics which follow is to compare variable schwa-deletion rates in the lower and upper groups in each film. I will here count the first thirty occurrences of schwa-retention or deletion per speaker in initial position. The percentage indicated in column 1 is the percentage of deletion of variable schwas in this linguistic context.

### Film 1: *Fric-frac*

	actual deletion
Renée	23%
Marcel	20%
<b>Loulou</b>	23%
<b>Jo</b>	33%

**Table 3.** Schwa-dropping in *Fric-frac*

There are no clear differences between the two groups except for Jo. Statistically, Jo obtains the highest rate of schwa-dropping with 33%. This is significant in that Jo is supposed to be a particularly low-class male.

Although this study is confined to the deletion of variable schwa, one can pinpoint, as Carton noted, that the use of “schwa-tagging”, at the end of word finals, is a salient feature of the vernacular of *Fric-Frac*: “le ton traînant ‘faubourien’ allonge les *e* [in word-final position] qui ont la même durée que les voyelles accentuées (18 à 29 cs)” (Carton 1999: 36):

e.g. “Marcel-e?”, “sur la tron-che”, “chuis d’Barbès-e” (ibid.).

Out of eighteen occurrences of “Marcel” in Loulou’s speech, twelve show the intrusion of a “parasitic mute -e” (Armstrong 1993: 112) in pre-pausal position which gives extra emphasis.

Film 2: *Circonstances atténuantes*

	actual deletion
Monsieur	0%
Madame	3%
<b>Marie</b>	50%
<b>Bouic</b>	57%

**Table 4.** Schwa-dropping in *Circonstances atténuantes*

There are clear differences between the two groups. Schwa-deletion is insignificant in the upper-group speech.

Film 3: *Le Jour se lève*

	actual deletion
Valentin	47%
<b>Clara</b>	57%
<b>Françoise</b>	67%
<b>François</b>	80%

**Table 5.** Schwa-dropping in *Le Jour se lève*

There are discernible differences between the lower and upper groups. Lower-class speakers tend to delete schwas more frequently.

Film 4: *La Règle du jeu*

	actual deletion
Geneviève	7%
Robert	13%
<b>Octave</b>	67%
<b>Marceau</b>	40%

**Table 6.** Schwa-dropping in *La Règle du jeu*

There are discernible differences between the two groups. The upper group rarely deletes schwas. Octave, the floater of *La Règle du jeu*, has the highest percentage of schwa-deletion. Marceau's deletion rate is lower than Octave's. Marceau's figure can be explained by his desire to accommodate with the upper-group usage as the film unravels, due to his position as a servant. Schwa-deletion particularly affects the pronoun "te" in both the lower and the upper group:

e.g. "Allez, viens t'coucher"

"Alors, si tu veux t'tuer pour Christine, ben tue-toi, mais tout seul"

"T'as une façon de t'jeter au cou des gens!..." (Octave in *La Règle du jeu*).

#### Film 5: *Hôtel du Nord*

	actual deletion
Renée	0%
Pierre	3%
<b>Raymonde</b>	43%
<b>Edmond</b>	17%

**Table 7.** Schwa-dropping in *Hôtel du Nord*

The preceding results parallel those of *Circonstances atténuantes*. There are significant differences between the upper and lower groups: Pierre's percentage of schwa-deletion reaches 3%, while Raymonde's amounts to nearly 43%.

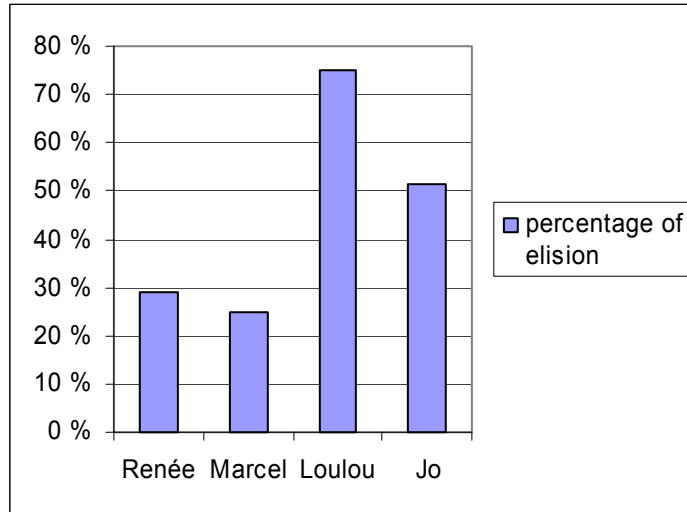
### 5.3 Schwa-deletion in pre-consonantal "je"

#### 5.3.1 General deletion rate of schwa in "je"

In the following statistics, the elided "je"s have been divided into three linguistic environments:

- 1) **J'** + Consonant + Vowel (e.g. "J'le", "J'te"; "J'ne")
- 2) **J'** + C + V + C (e.g. "J'monte")
- 3) **J'** + C + C + V (e.g. "J'n'm'en...")

To begin with, I counted all instances of non-elisions and elisions of “je” + C. I included in my percentages of non-elision all realisations of “je sais pas” and “je suis” as [ʃεpa] and [ʃui].



**Figure 1.** Proportion of schwa-deletion in pre-consonantal “je” in *Fric-frac*

Film 1: *Fric-frac*

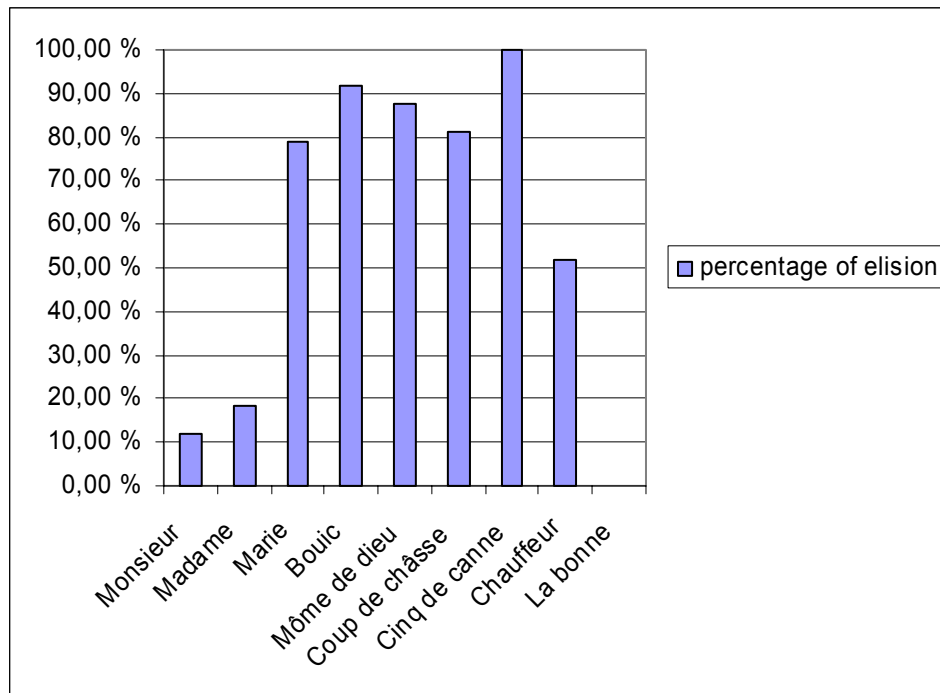
	percentage of elision
Renée	29%
Marcel	25%
<b>Loulou</b>	75%
<b>Jo</b>	51.2%

**Table 8.** Schwa-deletion in pre-consonantal “je” in *Fric-frac*

The results give a high percentage of “je” elision in Loulou and Jo’s speech. Reduction of “je” into “j’ ” is regarded by the script-writer of *Fric-frac* as a particularly lower-group feature. This feature is also present in the upper-group speech, but at a much lower rate.

Film 2: *Circonstances atténuantes*

	percentage of elision
Monsieur	11.7%
Madame	18.5%
<b>Marie</b>	79.1%
<b>Bouic</b>	91.6%
<b>Môme de dieu</b>	87.5%
<b>Coup de chasse</b>	81.25%
<b>Cinq de canne</b>	100%
<b>Chauffeur</b>	51.7%
<b>La bonne</b>	0%

Table 9. Schwa-deletion in *Circonstances atténuantes*Figure 2. Proportion of schwa-deletion in pre-consonantal “je” in *Circonstances atténuantes*

As it appears very clearly on this figure, the form “je” with a schwa is most frequently maintained in the speech of the upper group. There are rare instances of elision by Monsieur and Madame, when they interact with the lower-group speakers, perhaps reflecting a desire on their part to

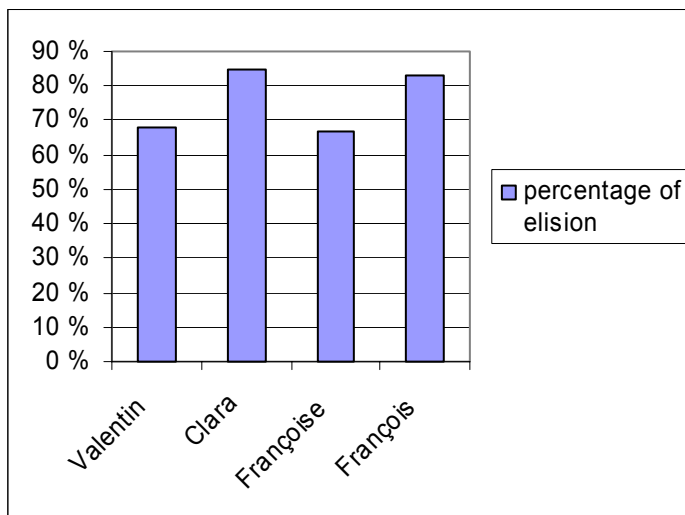


accommodate linguistically to the proletarian community. The reduction of “je” into “j’ ” is a feature even eschewed by La Bonne, although, with two *tokens*, her result is not statistically significant. Apart from her, the lower-group informants almost systematically elide the first-person pronoun.

Film 3: *Le Jour se lève*

	percentage of elision
Valentin	68%
<b>Clara</b>	85%
<b>Françoise</b>	67%
<b>François</b>	83%

**Table 10.** Schwa-deletion in *Le Jour se lève*

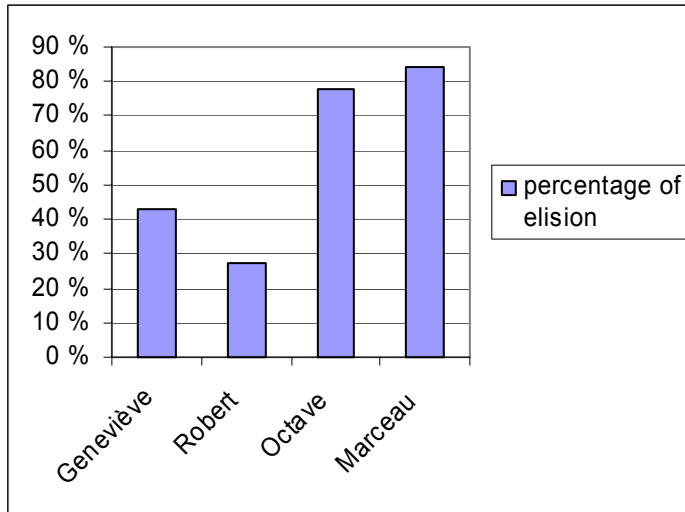


**Figure 3.** Proportion of schwa-deletion in pre-consonantal “je” in *Le Jour se lève*

In this film, schwa-deletion in “je” does not show clear social group correlation. Clara and François obtain, however, the highest rate of deletion.

Film 4: *La Règle du jeu*

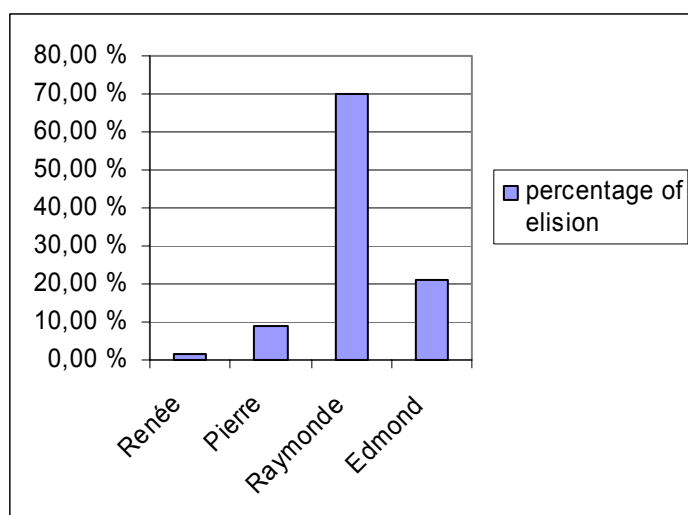
	percentage of elision
Geneviève	43%
Robert	27.2%
<b>Octave</b>	78%
<b>Marceau</b>	84%

Table 11. Schwa-deletion in *La Règle du jeu*Figure 4. Proportion of schwa-deletion in pre-consonantal “je” in *La Règle du jeu*

The results given in Table 11 confirm the impression drawn from the other films that the non-standard elision of “je” in front of a single consonant is most frequent. Marceau, the lower-group character, obtains the most significant result. Octave’s high score does not weaken the social group correlation, but confirms his position as a floater who moves in the direction of lower-group features. The data show that the elision of “je” is a social feature.

Film 5: *Hôtel du Nord*

	percentage of elision
Renée	1.5%
Pierre	9%
<b>Raymonde</b>	<b>70%</b>
<b>Edmond</b>	<b>21%</b>

Table 12. Schwa-deletion in *Hôtel du Nord*Figure 5. Proportion of schwa-deletion in pre-consonantal “je” in *Hôtel du Nord*

There are clear differences between the upper and lower-group characters. Raymonde has the highest score. The variant is not absent from the upper-group speech, but it is rare. With 21% of elision, Edmond fluctuates between the two social groups with a preference for the standard form.

### 5.3.2 Contexts of schwa-deletion in “je”

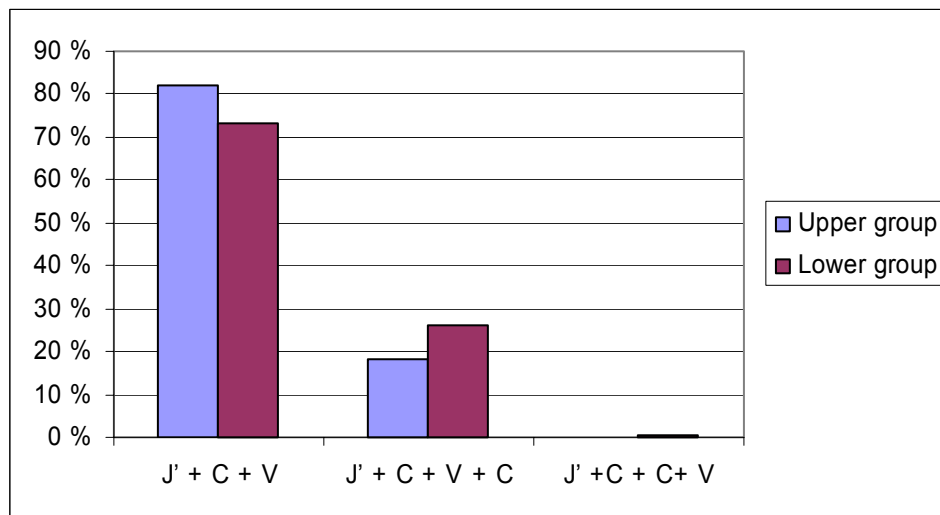
The following statistical exercise shown in Table 13 intends to establish, for each of the characters in the five films, in which phonetic contexts the dropping of [ə] in “je” mostly occurs.

The first pattern (**J'** + C + V) consists of the elision of “je”, in front of clitic pronouns or monosyllabic verbs (e.g. “j’té connais”, j’sais”). Pattern number 2 (**J'** + C + V + C) gives instances of elision in “je” in front of polysyllabic words (e.g. “j’connais”). The last pattern (**J'** + C + C + V)

targets elisions that produced a clash of three consonants (e.g. *j'n'sais pas*). Armstrong distinguishes likewise, in his study of the Dieuze data, “post-pausal mute *e* in monosyllabic and in polysyllabic words” (1993: 87–89).

	J' + C + V	J' + C + V + C	J' +C + C+ V
Upper group	82%	18%	0%
Lower group	73.4%	26%	0.60%

**Table 13.** Percentages of schwa-deletion in “je” in three different contexts



**Figure 6.** Schwa-deletion in “je” for the lower and upper groups in three different contexts

1) It is noticeable that “je” is mostly elided in front of a consonant that is immediately followed by a vowel, where there is no risk of a clash of three consonants. Upper and lower-group speakers behave in rather similar ways. The tables show that “je” is most frequently elided before clitic pronouns in the first phonetic context. All the characters that have been studied follow the same pattern, whatever their social group. I did not observe any clear social correlation in their treatment of schwa-deletion in this environment. The tendency in the film corpus is for both groups to drop “les impairs”:

- e.g. “j’me demande” (*Fric-frac*)
- “j’t e d’mande pardon” (*Fric-frac*)
- “j’me rappelle” (*Circonstances atténuantes*)
- “j’me rattraperai” (*Circonstances atténuantes*)
- “j’me serais” (*Le Jour se lève*)

2) The middle pattern (J' + C + V + C) is where I find the most social differences. On the whole, the lower-group speakers use more elisions than the upper-group speakers in this phonetic context.

- e.g. “J’reconnais que c’était pas des choses à faire” (*Fric-frac*)  
 “Vous permettez, que j’y réponde? ...” (*Fric-frac*)  
 “Ah, bah j’y préfère ça pour ma dignité.” (*Circonstances atténuantes*)  
 “J’potasse l’anglais.” (*Le Jour se lève*)

3) There is a very small proportion of elision in front of two consonants (J' + C + C + V) in both the upper group (Robert) and the lower groups (Marceau, Raymonde, Edmond): this phenomenon is extremely rare:

- e.g. “j’n’m’en consolerais pas” (*La Règle du jeu*)  
 “j’n’peux pas” (*La Règle du jeu*)  
 “j’n’l’aime pas” (*La Règle du jeu*)  
 “j’s’rais jamais” (*Hôtel du Nord*)

## 6. Conclusion

In this analysis, I have made a phonetic analysis of 1930s Parisian speech, as it is represented in French cinema. I make no strong claims about the representativity of the data. French dialogues give us an indication of the treatment actors made of schwa in that period.

Schwa-dropping is a salient variant of the lower-group speakers, although it is not completely absent from the upper-group speech. In most of the films studied, the percentage of variable schwa-deletion is two to three times greater in the lower-group speech than in that of the educated speakers. The script-writers and actors of the films saw this feature as characteristic of uneducated speech. In this corpus, schwa is normally elided in monosyllabic words followed by a fricative or a plosive (e.g. “pour qui qu’vous”, “j’yous”, “qu’est-ce qui s’passe”). Schwa is likewise deleted in initial position before an obstruent or a nasal (e.g. “r’pique”, “r’viendrez”, “d’avant”, “p’tit”, “tout d’même”). Schwa-tagging is only found in *Fric-frac* as a sociolinguistic marker of lower-group speakers.

The results demonstrate a clear correlation between schwa-deletion with “je” and social group membership. The tendency is for both lower and upper-group to delete schwas in front of monosyllabic verbs and clitics. However, the statistics indicate a higher proportion of schwa-deletion in

front of polysyllabic verbs in the lower-group speech. The fusion of the subject pronoun (“j’me”, “j’t’e”, “j’le”) is clearly a feature of informal speech, while the fusion of the subject pronoun with a polysyllabic verb which creates a long word cluster is more of a social marker.

If in 1930s French films, schwa-deletion was clearly social, today, schwa-deletion is geographical. There is a North-South divide with regards to schwas. Schwa-deletion is not a significant marker in Northern French, but it is more widely spread than in Southern French. However, this is a dynamic feature, with young women more and more complying with the Northern norm. To investigate whether it is a stylistic or social marker, one would need to examine these features on a larger scale. On a larger corpus, auditory techniques should be accompanied with instrumental techniques.

### **Appendix: Data extract**

*Hôtel du Nord* (1938)

*Raymonde: Arletty, Edmond: Louis Jouvet*

- Raymonde: Coquard mis à part t’es plutôt beau mec. Par terre on se dispute, mais au lit on s’explique. Et sur l’oreiller on se comprend. Alors?
- Edmond: Alors rien. J’en ai assez tu saisis? Je m’asphyxie. Tu saisis, je m’asphyxie.
- Raymonde: A Toulon y’a de l’air puisqu’il y a la mer, tu respireras mieux!
- Edmond: Partout où on ira ça sentira le pourri.
- Raymonde: Allons à l’étranger, aux colonies.
- Edmond: Avec toi?
- Raymonde: C’t’idée!
- Edmond: Alors ça sera partout pareil. J’ai besoin de changer d’atmosphère et mon atmosphère c’est toi.
- Raymonde: C’est la première fois qu’on me traite d’atmosphère. Si j’suis une atmosphère t’es un drôle de bled! Ah là là, des types qui sont du milieu sans en être et qui crânent à cause de ce qu’ils ont été, on devrait les vider! Atmosphère, atmosphère, est-ce que j’ai une gueule d’atmosphère? Puisque c’est ça vas-y tout seul à la Varenne! Bonne pêche et bonne atmosphère!

*Fric-Frac (1939)**Jo: Michel Simon, Marcel: Fernandel, Loulou: Arletty*

- Jo: Merci.  
 Marcel: A la vôtre Mademoiselle, euh ...  
 Loulou: Loulou.  
 Marcel: Loulou. Oh oh, c'est un joli nom ça. Moi c'est Marcel.  
 Loulou: Ah oui?  
 Jo: Et à la vôtre!  
 Loulou: T'as gagné?  
 Jo: Un ... Deux.  
 Loulou: Oh, tu vas pas nous compter toute la soirée devant le blair. C'est pas marrant.  
 Jo: Si je compte pas à haute voix je m'embrouille moi. Je vais pas rester toute la soirée ici. J'ai rendez-vous avec Petit Louis. Trois.  
 Loulou: A cause?  
 Jo: Pour une affaire.  
 Loulou: Qu'est-ce que c'est?  
 Jo: Un cassement.  
 Loulou: Où ça?  
 Jo: Je vais pas te bonir ça devant un étranger.  
 Jo: Quat'... non quat' ou cinq? Bon, je sais plus ou j'en suis maintenant.  
 Marcel: J'ai du mal à comprendre ce qu'il dit. Il est français?  
 Loulou: Pur sang de la Villette. Moi je suis de Barbès.  
 Marcel: Ah, tout ça c'est de l'argot.  
 Loulou: Vous avez mis le doigt dessus. L'oseille c'est le fric. Se faire la paire c'est se débiter. Casser les pieds c'est emmouscailler. Bonir un truc c'est jacter.  
 Marcel: Jacter?  
 Loulou: Causer quoi!

*Circonstances Atténuantes (1939)**Bouic: Dorville, Monsieur: Michel Simon, Madame: Suzanne Dantès*

- Bouic: Ah, dites donc, y m'reste pas grand-chose à manger à c't'heure-ci. J'vais toujours vous faire une petite omelette.  
 Mme: Les œufs vous sont défendus.  
 Bouic: Oh, pas les miens. Des œufs du jour. Des poules nourries avec du blé. Ah. Ils sont recommandés aux malades, mes cocards, oui madame. Alors voilà: nous disons une omelette baveuse pour deux. Et puis j'ai un p'tit restant de lapin, j'vais vous l'faire réchauffer.  
 M.: C'est-à-dire le lapin nous fait mal.

Bouic: Ah le lapin de Paris, moi aussi, le lapin d'chou, qu'a l'goût d'Colombin. Ah, ah. Pas l'mien! Et comme boisson?

Mme: De l'eau minérale.

Bouic: De l'eau minérale? Mais j'vends pas d'flotte, moi. D'abord c'est plus cher que l'vin. Et puis l'eau, en bouteille surtout, mon médecin me l'a défendue, moi. Il m'a dit que c'étaient des eaux mortes, tout ce qu'il y a de malsain. Mais, en revanche j'ai un p'tit beaujolais...mine de rien...mais qui vous a tout de même trente ans de prison! Et une beaujolais une!

*Le Jour se lève (1939)*

*Clara: Arletty, François: Jean Gabin*

Clara: La vache! Ah, les femmes sont bien folles et moi j'suis la reine. Faut avouer qu'il faut avoir d'l'eau dans le gaz et des papillons dans le compteur pour être restée trois ans avec un type pareil.

François: Vous êtes bien gentille, mais quand vous aurez fini de faire le ménage, vous m'le direz.

Clara: Le ménage?

François: Ben oui quoi, vous arrivez là, vous ouvrez votre tiroir, vous battez vos tapis. J'vous ai rien demandé. Vous me racontez tout vot' vie. Qu'est-ce que vous voulez que ça me foute.

Clara: Faut pas m'en vouloir. Si je vous ai parlé, c'est histoire de ne pas causer toute seule. Ce soir j'suis tellement heureuse. Vous pouvez pas savoir.

*La Règle du jeu (1939)*

*Robert: Marcel Dalio Marceau: Julien Carette*

Robert: Pas fort. Dis donc, Marceau, y'a pas des moments où tu voudrais être arabe?

Marceau: Ah ! Non, monsieur le Marquis, pourquoi faire?

Robert: A cause du harem !

Marceau: Ah ! ah ! oui !

Robert: Les musulmans sont les seuls qui aient fait montre d'un peu de logique dans cette fameuse question des rapports entre les femmes et les hommes.

Marceau: Ben !

Robert: Bah ! dans l'fond, ils sont bâtis comme nous !

Marceau: Ben voyons !

Robert: Y'en a toujours une qu'ils préfèrent.

Marceau: Oui...



- Robert: Mais ils ne se croient pas obligés à cause de c’la de flanquer les autres à la porte, ... et de leur faire de la peine.
- Marceau: Ben voyons !
- Robert: Moi, j’voudrais faire de peine à personne. Surtout pas aux femmes. Merci! C’est l’drame de ma vie.
- Marceau: Oui, mais pour ça, il faut avoir les moyens.
- Robert: Comment ? Mais même avec les moyens, j’finis par rendre tout l’monde malheureux: femme, maîtresse et moi-même... par-dessus l’marché !
- Marceau: Moi, monsieur le Marquis, les femmes.... que ça soit pour les avoir ou pour les quitter ou pour les garder, j’essaie d’abord de les faire rigoler. Quand une femme rigole, elle est désarmée, vous en faites c’que vous voulez !

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