On the early history of the International Congress of Phonetic Sciences: from 1931 to 1938

The conference series of the International Congress of Phonetic Sciences (ICPhS) has a long-standing history that starts with the first meeting in Amsterdam in 1932, followed by those in London in 1935 and in Ghent in 1938. The second world war and the post-war period mark a disruption of more than 20 years for ICPhS (meeting no. 4 was held in Helsinki in 1961). In this talk I will give an overview on the proceedings of ICPhS of the 1930s. All contributions from the first to the third ICPhS are now online available as searchable pdf documents on the website of the Saarbrücken phonetics group [1].

When regarding the recent ICPhS meetings of the last 20 or 25 years it can be stated that all these meetings show the following standard features: all contributions are in English, there are several hundreds of papers and participants, authors have to follow a standardised length of the written contributions that mainly reports on experimental studies that are presented with a similar structure (title, abstract, introduction, methods, results, discussion, conclusion, references).

However, those standards, that are taken for granted nowadays, were not standard at all when this conference series started. As can be expected, the number of contributions in the 1930s was by far smaller: 60 on average in contrast to c. 700 for the recent conferences. Regarding language the diversity across the papers is remarkable: though English is selected most (38%), German is on par (37%), but there are also papers in French (24%) and a few ones in Italian (1%). All contributions are authored by a single individual, in contrast to today where we can count only about 25% of all articles by a single author. Interestingly, the 'papers' collected in the proceedings of the 1930s are not 'written papers' but they rather are manuscripts (and sometimes probably transcripts) of talks, often followed by short summaries of the discussion that take place after the talks. Here and there illustrations are included whereas references to works of others is sparsely mentioned in footnotes or the respective colleagues are mentioned as communication partners. Studies with single or only a few subjects seem to be standard in those times. The talk will also touch upon the appearance of important technical terms and concepts such as coarticulation and formants.

[1] https://www.coli.uni-saarland.de/groups/BM/phonetics/resources.html