

## TEACHING PHONETICS

Peter Ladefoged

Phonetics Lab, Linguistics Department, UCLA, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1543

### ABSTRACT

A brief overview of the origins of contemporary phonetic teaching is followed by an outline of the general format of the symposium.

### GENERAL PHONETICS

A large proportion of the people who attend phonetics congresses are concerned with teaching phonetics. Accordingly, in this session, we will both present and seek ideas on what we should teach, and how we should teach it. There is no way in which we will be able to discuss all aspects of phonetics. Ours is an active field in which new discoveries are always being made, so that no one can ever be completely up to date. No doubt the presentations at this congress will provide material for many hours of future instruction, but most of this will be for advanced students. What we will attempt to do here is to consider the needs of students of general phonetics. What do they need to know, and how are they going to learn it?

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

We should begin by noting that organized teaching of *general* phonetics is fairly new. There were several great phoneticians at the end of the nineteenth century, but very little teaching of the subject. Alexander Melville Bell was a university lecturer in elocution, a subject which included only part of phonetics as we now know it. Henry Sweet eventually became a university Reader in Phonetics, but, according to Daniel Jones, Sweet did not teach classes in general phonetics (Daniel Jones has noted (p.c.) that he was not Sweet's pupil but met him on a number of occasions). Paul Passy held a chair of General and Comparative Phonetics, but his main academic interests were in modern language teaching. Otto Jespersen was a professor of English Language and Literature, and devoted most of his time to non-phonetic issues. Perhaps the closest to general phoneticians were Wilhelm Viëtor, who was a Professor of Linguistics, and

l'abbé Rousselot, who established the first university phonetics laboratory as well as working in dialect geography. But neither of them presented an overview of the field as a whole in regular organized classes of the kind that are now available.

Most of the European phoneticians of the first half of the twentieth century were concerned with teaching pronunciation, usually in connection with teaching a foreign language, although sometimes as teachers of the deaf or others with pathological problems. As David Abercrombie [1] has reported, even Daniel Jones, the most well known Professor of Phonetics throughout the first half of the present century, did not teach general phonetics. His students learnt about the subject only through studying the phonetics of English, the phonetics of French, and so on. Substantial teaching of general phonetics did not begin until the 1940's, with scholars such as Malmberg in Sweden, Fischer-Jørgensen in Denmark and Abercrombie in Scotland. There were older Departments of Phonetics, such as that at London, but they were concerned with teaching phonetic skills rather than with presenting a general overview of the field.

In the early part of the century, American scholars such as Sapir were also emphasizing practical phonetic skills in their training of anthropology students (Emeneau, p.c.). But the situation was slightly different from that in Europe in that the main impetus for phonetic training came from the study of American Indian languages rather than from studying languages such as French and German. Towards the end of the first half of the century Pike, a professor of Anthropology, formulated the first contemporary synthesis of phonetic issues [2] while being concerned with training missionaries and bible translators.

Thus in neither Europe nor the U.S. was there a subject, general phonetics, that was taught until the 1940's. Abercrombie's course at Edinburgh

University in 1949 is one of the earliest year-long courses in general phonetics. Since then the subject has developed different emphases, but the basic topics that all students of phonetics should know remain much the same as those taught in Abercrombie's course: articulatory and acoustic phonetics, speech perception, experimental phonetic techniques, phonetic performance skills and the classification and symbolization of speech sounds.

Times are changing rapidly, and the impetus for much phonetic work is now coming from those needing to know more about speech communication, rather than from those studying foreign languages. Nowadays it is appropriate to add a knowledge of computer speech processing to those listed above. However, it is still true that the other areas—articulatory and acoustic phonetics, speech perception, experimental techniques, the classification and symbolization of speech sounds, and performance skills—remain (together with computer speech processing) the basis of the subject today. Anyone who hopes to solve current problems in speech communication needs a good grounding in all these areas.

### A SYMPOSIUM ON TEACHING PHONETICS

It is possible to study phonetics in different ways in many institutions. This symposium will begin with an account by Gerrit Bloothoof of some of the possible ways of studying phonetics in Europe, with particular regard to the relation between phonetics and speech communication. We will then consider some fundamental aspects of the subject: teaching acoustic phonetics, which Jacqueline Vaissiere will discuss, problems of intonation, which Mary Beckman will present, and the development of phonetic skills, which I will consider. As we have seen, there are many other topics that are of importance to phoneticians, including fundamental notions of articulatory phonetics, the anatomy and physiology of speech, speech perception, speech synthesis and recognition, and phonetic transcription.

These and other similar topics are all important matters, and we do not wish to seem neglectful of them. We hope that some of them will be dealt with in the general discussion.

Part of the delight of studying phonetics is that it has connections with so many different disciplines. In this Congress we have a very wide range of people, nearly all of whom think of themselves as phoneticians of some sort. What holds us all together? What is the core of the subject? How should we teach it? How should we help newcomers have as much fun as we all have?

### REFERENCES

- [1] Abercrombie, D. (1991). *Fifty Years in Phonetics*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- [2] Pike, K. (1944). *Phonetics*, Ann Arbor, MI, University of Michigan Press.