

## **Gimson, Alfred Charles (1917-1985) [51]**

**J.C.Wells, University College London**

A.C. Gimson was the leading phonetician of British English in the second half of the twentieth century.

He is known throughout the world for his works on English pronunciation, particularly for the textbook *An introduction to the pronunciation of English*, which despite its unduly modest title is still the standard work on the subject. (Since his death it has been extensively revised and rewritten, first by Ramsaran and then by Cruttenden.)

As an undergraduate at University College London (UCL), Gimson gained first-class honors in French. It was at that time that he first came into contact with phonetics, through the classes in French phonetics conducted by H el ene Coustenoble, a lecturer in the Department of Phonetics headed by Professor Daniel Jones. This was in 1939, and upon graduation he was called up into the British army. There he acted as a forces liaison officer, first with the French and then with the Free Polish forces. By 1945 he held the rank of Major. As the war ended Jones intervened to get him an early discharge so that he could join his department as Lecturer in Phonetics.

Jones groomed Gimson as his successor. Upon Jones's retirement in 1949, Gimson took over from him as Secretary of the International Phonetic Association (IPA) and as Editor of its journal, the *Maître Phonétique*. In due course Gimson was to be responsible for transforming this journal (then written entirely in phonetic transcription, with the official parts always in French) into the *Journal of the International Phonetic Association*, written in ordinary spelling and with English as the official language. Later, he was elected President of the IPA.

In the 1950s, English phonetics was still dominated by Jones's approach. Valuable in its day, by now it was becoming dated. Gimson maintained Jones's emphasis on the importance of training in practical performance in producing and in recognizing sounds, but reinvigorated the phonetic theory and practice of English phonetics by propagating views deriving from contemporary American structuralist doctrine. This included such terminological innovations as *allophone* and the notational distinction between /phonemes/ and [allophones], two innovations which Jones, despite his great interest in phoneme theory, had never adopted. In addition, Gimson extended Jonesian ear-training exercises by including drills on minimal pairs, something now taken for granted.

When Gimson's *Introduction* first appeared in 1962, it was immediately accepted as the standard description of Received Pronunciation (RP), displacing Jones's own works from this role.

From 1946 until his retirement in 1983 Gimson remained at UCL. In 1966 he was appointed Professor of Phonetics, and in 1971, on the retirement of Dennis Fry (q.v.) he became Head of a newly amalgamated Department of Phonetics and Linguistics.

Unlike his earnest and perhaps excessively formal predecessor, Gimson had an easy relaxed style of speaking and lecturing. In the 1960s he became popular as a broadcaster, made familiar to the British public through a series of brief talks on pronunciation he gave as part of the breakfast-time *Today* programme on the BBC. But it is in the world of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) that his name is particularly well known. He made frequent overseas lecture tours at the invitation of the British Council, the Linguaphone company, or local universities. His two textbooks *English Pronunciation Practice* (1965, with G.F. Arnold) and *A Practical Course of English Pronunciation: a perceptual approach* (1975) reflect his concern with the teaching of pronunciation in the EFL context.

Gimson's most enduring influence on EFL theory and practice is arguably in the matter of phonetic transcription. Although Jones had experimented with a number of different types of transcription for English (all within an IPA framework), his *English Pronouncing Dictionary* and other EFL-oriented works used a 'quantitative' notation in which vowel length was symbolized explicitly, but length-related quality differences only implicitly (thus *bead* bi:d, *bid* bid, *caught* kɔ:t, *cot* kɔt). By the 1960s this notation was facing serious competition in the 'qualitative' system used Abercrombie and

others, in which quality differences were explicitly shown and length marks not used (*bead* bid, *bid* bɪd, *caught* kɔt, *cot* kɒt). Gimson's 'quantitative-qualitative' system succeeded in achieving a synthesis of the two types, with both quantity and quality made explicit, even at the price of added redundancy (*bead* bi:d, *bid* bɪd, *caught* kɔ:t, *cot* kɒt). He popularized this notation first in his *Introduction* and then, crucially, in the fourteenth edition of Jones's *English pronouncing dictionary* (1977; Gimson had taken over the editorship in 1964). With minor variations, this notation has been virtually universally adopted in British-influenced phonetic usage.

In the UCL Department of Phonetics that Gimson took over, the main teaching load involved students of speech therapy, who were not actually registered for any university degree. Gimson played a major role in the reorganization of speech therapy education in Britain and the conversion of speech therapy (now called speech and language therapy) into an all-graduate profession. At UCL, with his departmental colleagues Adrian Fourcin and Evelyn Abberton, he was responsible for an arrangement whereby students of what became the National Hospital's College of Speech Sciences were registered for the BSc as undergraduates of UCL. (Subsequently, the NHCSS actually became a part of UCL, as the Department of Human Communication Science, and its students now no longer have this roundabout mode of registration.) Under Jones, phonetics had been something of an orphan subject in university terms, taught only to occasional students and postgraduates; Gimson's legacy was a much

stronger Department of Phonetics and Linguistics, with a large undergraduate body.

Gimson did not like people to call him by his first name. As a writer, broadcaster or lecturer he was always just “A. C. Gimson”. His friends and colleagues knew him as “Gim” /gɪm/. It was only after his death that most of us discovered what his full name was.

In later life he suffered for some years from heart problems, which were treated with beta-blockers. He died unexpectedly of heart attack while mowing the lawn with an old-fashioned push-mower.

## **Bibliography**

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A.C. Gimson

born 7 June 1917;

died 22 April 1985.

## **ABSTRACT**

A.C. Gimson was the leading phonetician of British English in the second half of the twentieth century, known for his works on English pronunciation. He succeeded Daniel Jones as Professor of Phonetics at University College London and was active in the International Phonetic Association. He established the transcription system now generally used for Received Pronunciation.



## **KEYWORDS**

English pronunciation, phonetics, Received Pronunciation, International Phonetic Association, pronouncing dictionary, vowel notation