

Teach Yourself Phonetics (and maybe a bit of phonology)

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1 Introduction The title of this paper may be a bit misleading, but the paper has a serious purpose. It is aimed at those students who have got past the learning of symbols and phonetic terminology, who are already pretty competent at recognising, labelling and producing a wide range of speech sounds and who may also have some knowledge of the acoustics of speech

1.1 Deep and surface learning: As phonetics is a pretty technical subject, there is always a danger that students (and sometimes their teachers) are satisfied with the skills and knowledge mentioned above, and think that is the whole of the story. In other words, they are happy to remain at what is often called a "surface" level of learning. This concept, which has been around for a long time (see for instance Marton & Säljö, 1976) has had various definitions and characterisations over the years, but a recent one is given by Biggs (2003: 14) as "the intention to get the task out of the way with minimum trouble while appearing to meet course requirements". Surface learning is contrasted with "deep" learning. Biggs (op. cit. p.16) defines this as a type of learning which stems from "a felt need to engage the task appropriately and meaningfully, so the student tries to use the most appropriate cognitive activities for handling it"

1.2 Materials to encourage deep learning: The two concepts are described above in terms of students' outlook and strategies, but there are some things that teachers of phonetics can do to encourage the development of deep learning. One is to use materials as exercises and topics for discussion, which have patently *not* been written specifically with course requirements in mind, but which come from the "real world" outside the phonetics classroom or the speech science laboratory. Another important benefit of the use of such materials is a demonstration of how *useful* a sound knowledge of phonetics can be and how one can founder miserably without it. This is where the *Teach Yourself* of the title comes in.

1.3 Some caveats: First, the suggestions here are just that -- suggestions for the occasional activity, which broadens the horizons of the students. Secondly, these activities should be used with caution and only with students of the level specified, as some of the suggestions below certainly do not conform to the often commended "error-free" approach to learning and teaching.

2 Language textbooks Most, but by no means all, language textbooks, such as the venerable *Teach Yourself* series, include a section on the pronunciation of the language concerned. The quality of these accounts ranges from the excellent to the laughable¹. Those of the latter sort are perhaps the more useful for the more advanced student of phonetics.

2.1 Poor phonetics: One use that can be made of such pronunciation guides is to choose a textbook for a language that is unknown to the student group, and which has a

¹ Any criticism (explicit or implied) of a particular textbook relates solely to the accuracy or usefulness of the account of the pronunciation of the language, and not to the quality of the textbook as a whole. Coincidentally, an interesting discussion of the short-comings of pronunciation guides in language textbooks can be found in recent posts in John Wells's blog at <http://phonetic-blog.blogspot.com/>. See blogs for 8/7/09 and 14/7/09

less than perfect pronunciation section, and to ask for a general critique of the treatment. This could be guided by a check-list of the sort below:

- Poor use of phonetic symbols
- Non IPA symbols
- Confusing or erroneous phonetic terminology
- Missing or minimal treatments of such things as stress and tone

A good example of a textbook (although rather an old one) that can be used in this way is *Teach Yourself Icelandic* (Glendening, 1966). Although this has quite an extensive and reasonably competent pronunciation guide, there are enough infelicities for competent students to pounce on. Here is a selection:

- [u] resembles the vowel sound of English "earn" or of the French "*peur*" (p. xii)
- [j] is the sound that occurs in the English "steal", except that the *l* in *-lk*, *-lp*, *-lt* is palatalized (resembling the Welsh *ll*). (p. xv)
- [x] is used for a voiced velar fricative, instead of [ɣ] (passim)
- The term guttural is used instead of velar (passim)
- The symbol [ŋ] is used a number of times without explanation (passim)

However, spotting this sort of error is only the first step. Discussion of how to correct these, both for phonetically competent readers and for those who know no phonetics, should lead to consideration of the usefulness of explicitly defined, and widely accepted technical terminology, and the importance thinking *phonetically*, rather than relying on vague, impressionistic explanations.

2.2 Comparing transliterations: Those languages whose orthography is not based on the Latin alphabet are sometimes presented in transliteration, either as a supplement to, or replacement of the native orthography.

An example of this is Japanese. The two books *Teach Yourself Japanese* (Dunn & Yanada, 1958) and *Colloquial Japanese* (Clarke & Hamamura, 2003) use different transliterations. The former presents the language solely in the *kunrei-siki* transliteration system without the use of kanji or kana. The latter uses a very different transliteration system as an aid to learning the usual orthography. While neither has an extensive account of Japanese pronunciation, the differences between the transliterations is striking enough to raise the question of which is the better at representing the phonetic/phonological system of the language, as described in more scholarly accounts.

2.3 Explaining phonological regularities: Most language textbooks are pretty bad at dealing with phonological processes. Frequently, the authors tie themselves in inelegant knots, or resort to listing correspondences, which, when seen from a phonetic viewpoint, are pretty simple. One use of such accounts is to ask students to recast the explanation of the process in more explicit terms, using "official" terminology such as *assimilation*, *lenition*, *epenthesis*, *natural class* and the like. One might also ask students use the account as a basis to formulate explicit phonological rules in terms of features or to express the regularity in terms of constraint-based phonology, or whatever flavour of phonology you favour.

A quite simple and straightforward example of a textbook account of this sort may be found in *Teach Yourself Maltese* (Aquilina, 1965), which, during a generally excellent treatment of Maltese pronunciation, introduces the concept of total assimilation affecting the definite article. The author points out (p. 36) that the final consonant of the definite article assimilates totally to the initial consonant segment of the following noun, if this

consonant belongs to the so-called "Sun letters" (Maltese *Xemxin* [ʃemʃɪn]), which he lists as *ċ n r s t x ż z* ([tʃ n r s t ʃ ʒ ts]), but that no assimilation takes place before the so-called "Moon letters" (Maltese *Qamrin* [ʔamrin]). It shouldn't take long for a good student to spot that the Sun letters are all apical, and the Moon letters are non-apical. This could then lead to discussion about how a moderate amount of technical phonetic information might lead to a securer understanding of language processes and a lightening of the memory load for learners of a language.

3 The Internet

3.1 Speech Accent Archive: Many of you may already know this large collection of speech samples of English, read by native and non-native speakers of many kinds. It can be found at <http://accent.gmu.edu/index.php> and is well worth a visit. The good quality recordings are all of the same standard passage. The example below in Figure 1, chosen entirely at random, is of a 60 year-old female speaker from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA. While the recordings are very useful, the transcriptions are often rather contentious. For instance, in the example it is difficult to reconcile the transcriptions

[p^hli:z kəl^ɪ stɛlə æsk hæɪ rə
 bʰɪŋ ði:z ʃɪŋz wɪθ hæɪ fɪəm ðə
 stœɪ sɪks spju:nz əv fɪɛʃ snɔ̃ʊ
 pi:z fæɪv θɪk slæ:ɪbz əv blu:
 ʃi:z ɛn meɪbi ə snæk fæɪ hæɪ
 bɪəðəɪ bæk wi əlsəʊ nɪdə
 smɔl^ɪ plæstɪk sneɪk ɛn ə bɪg
 tɔɪ frɔ:g fɔɪ ðə kri:dz ʃi kɛn
 skʌp ði:z ʃɪŋz ɪntu: θaɪ: æd
 bɛ:gz ɛn wi wɛl gɔʊ mɪt hæɪ
 wɛnzdeɪ æt ðə tɹeɪn steɪʃn]

[p^hli:z], [ʃɪŋz], [bɛ:gz] with what one hears in the recording. The transcription [ði:z] for *these* seems mightily eccentric and it is not clear that the two instances of the phrase *these things* should be transcribed differently. Further, why is the first vowel in [nɪdə] left without a length mark, when almost all other instances of the symbol [ɪ] have it? Do the pair of symbols [ɔ] as in *for*, *also*, *small* and [ɔ:] as in *frog* record a real or an imagined difference? Do *also* and *will* really have a non-velarised I?

Figure 1 A Speech Accent Archive example

All these points, and maybe many others, could be used to stimulate useful discussion, especially about the concept of delicacy in transcription, the difference between systematic and impressionistic transcription, and the widely held belief that there is a definitive, "correct" phonetic representation of a particular bit of speech.

3.2 Wikipedia: It is easy to indulge in Wikipedia-bashing, but there are signs that the quality control is slowly improving. What is certain is that there is a huge amount of information available on the phonetics and phonology of a wide range of languages, as well as treatments of phonetic and phonological concepts and definitions of phonetic and phonological terminology. One need not despair when finding an article that raises the blood pressure. Copy it and let your students criticise it. Here is an example. There are probably scores of others.

Some languages have consonants with two simultaneous places of articulation, called coarticulation. When these are doubly articulated, the articulators must be independently movable, and therefore there may only be one each from the categories labial, coronal, dorsal, and radical. (The glottis controls phonation and sometimes the airstream, and is not considered an articulator.)

Now what is wrong with that?

4. Conclusions

All of the above has necessarily only scratched the surface of what can be done with resources like language textbooks and internet sites. It would certainly be a very useful thing to have an online archive of useful resources that colleagues have come across. The main point of this paper is to emphasise that there is a great deal of material available that can be pressed in to service to provide more advanced students with opportunities to apply the knowledge they already have, and to reflect on what it means to think in a scientific way about speech.

The examples given here are fairly simple. They are meant to be pointers to the kind of thing that can be useful in encouraging a deeper approach to learning phonetics, and to suggest that teachers of phonetics have a responsibility to engender the development of the attitudes to learning of their students, and not just to impart facts and skills about speech.

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