

## Why phonetics matters: food for thought for aspiring teachers of French

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**0 Introduction** Suppose you were invited to speak on the subject of phonetics in pronunciation teaching, at a French language teacher-training workshop, and your only directives were: “the participants will be mostly graduate students of French literature”, and “we can schedule your session for an hour and a half”. Where would you begin? Would you focus your attention on basic phonetic knowledge, simple teaching strategies, correction techniques, the usefulness of phonetic transcription, varieties of spoken French, the display of phonetic information in French textbooks (or the noticeable lack thereof) -- on all of the above (none of the above)? Would you throw up your hands in dismay and say “It is not possible to squeeze an entire course in French phonetics into a 90-minute time-frame!”

Three summers ago, when I willingly consented to participate in an orientation workshop for new French Teaching Assistants in my department, I found myself in a situation similar to the one that I have just described. After careful consideration, I knew that I would not attempt to squeeze an entire course in French phonetics into a ninety-minute session: information-overload was not the best approach as it would turn the TAs away from the very subject in which I was hoping to engage them. Selectivity was clearly the route to follow. Of all the topics that I felt to be essential (including the ones mentioned above), I decided to pick for discussion those which I could illustrate with real examples, taken from actual classroom experiences, reasoning that participants would be able to relate best to those. The workshop talk turned out to be highly successful: everyone was very enthusiastic and appreciative (some participants even told me that they now felt that phonetics was an indispensable course for graduate teaching assistants of French); and I was asked to give a repeat performance. This paper discusses some of the ideas offered in that talk.

**1 Phonetics matters** What better way is there to begin an address to aspiring teachers of French, all eager to hear about the involvement of phonetics in pronunciation teaching, than with the compelling conviction: Pronunciation matters! And perhaps in no language does it matter more so than in French. Do not let others tell you differently. Good pronunciation should be one of the first things learnt in French; and the novice teacher may need to be reminded of this. Many teachers of French avoid teaching pronunciation altogether, for diverse reasons, e.g., they know very little about the subject; or they believe that pronunciation teaching is unnecessary or useless—a subject they can dispense with if they are pressed for time; they think that students will “pick up” the correct pronunciation by themselves. So too do many students (especially beginners) avoid studying pronunciation—they may dislike the obligatory repetition drills, or the enormous investment of time required to “get it right”: “I don’t have the time to deal with phonetics or pronunciation in my classes”, says the French instructor; “phonetics is boring and takes too much time”, says the student. Aspiring teachers of French have a double responsibility: they must become informed themselves about French phonetics and about the benefits of including pronunciation teaching in the

curriculum (preferably through formal course work); and they must also help learners overcome obstacles, and aid them in the correction of specific pronunciation problems.

From my perspective (that of the phonetics teacher), it is far better for the student to learn “to pronounce it right” the first time around (i.e. as soon as a term or concept is introduced by the teacher), rather than to wait until later when bad habits will have already begun to be formed. Years of teaching corrective phonetics to American students of French attest to the difficulty involved in the correction process when one is dealing with fossilized pronunciation problems.

You may have heard the saying that goes something like this: a speaker of a foreign language can get by with simple vocabulary and simple grammar, but not with “simple pronunciation” for there is no such thing. If one does not have good pronunciation, one has bad pronunciation. And the results of bad pronunciation can be drastic: people may not understand you; they may make fun of you; they may think you are stupid; they may not want to listen to you and simply ignore you, or the like.

In a recent conversation with one of my undergraduate advisees, I was amazed to learn that she did not want to go to France to study: She had gone twice when she was in high school (to Lyon and to Paris), and the French people she talked to refused to speak French with her. Whenever she addressed her interlocutors in French they replied in English; some of them would even add the phrase, “*ah, l’Américaine!*” The student found this behavior very insulting, and felt that her French was being laughed at. As she never really had an opportunity to practice her French with native speakers, she decided not to study abroad in France. Rather, she would participate in the study abroad program in Morocco, convinced that francophone speakers in Rabat would be less prone to respond to her in English and also less critical of her spoken French.

In spite of this student’s motivation to speak French, her noticeable American accent got in the way. It was of no consequence to her that her French interlocutors who were answering her in English had apparently understood her French; or that their accents in English were likely as noticeable as hers was in French. What most affected her was the psychological impact of the insult, not the linguistic reality of her pronunciation (or that of her interlocutors).

**2 “How can I get rid of my American accent in French?”** Students and instructors alike often ask this question. Unfortunately, there are no quick fixes, no pills that you can swallow to eradicate the accent problem. Hard work, practice, lots of exercises, patience, and time, along with formal instruction in phonetics, and a proper linguistic environment will help lessen the traces of the American accent, but may not rid you of it completely. Additionally, commercial accent reduction training and coaching courses are available (which promise miracles but usually deliver little). My advice to French students is to begin with phonetic knowledge, e.g. a proper study of the characteristic features of a French accent and of an American accent; and the identification of problem areas.

Lists of common pronunciation errors made by American speakers of French abound. Most lists are mere copies of their predecessors, which ultimately go back to the contrastive analysis studies of the 1960s, where errors were attributed to interference from mother tongue. For example, if an American learner of French substituted the French back vowel /u/ (as ‘*dessous*’, ‘under’) for the front vowel /y/ (as in ‘*dessus*’ ‘above’), contrastive analysis would explain the error retrospectively by saying that it was because this latter [y] is unknown to the phonemic system of English (note that the two sounds are also phonetically and perceptually very similar). Not always included in such

lists, where one is sure to find most of the vowels and the consonant /ʁ/, are the consonants /l/ and /ʒ/. When American learners pronounce the French dental/alveolar lateral /l/ of 'il' [il] 'he', as the velarized [ɫ] of English 'ill'; or when they substitute the English affricate /dʒ/ for the French fricative /ʒ/ in word-initial position (e.g. 'la gymnastique' [laʒimnastik])—French has no [ɫ], or [dʒ]—one does not explain these errors as an inability on the part of the American learners to distinguish perceptually or to pronounce correctly the two non-French sounds ([ɫ]; [dʒ]), which do occur in English. Rather, one sees the substitution of the English allophones as an instance of transfer (the learners' automatic tendency to pronounce the velar lateral in word-final position, or the affricate in word-initial position, because of mother-tongue influence. Knowing where to expect the errors and/or why they occur is part of the task of correcting them; and correcting them is part of the task of getting rid of an American accent in French.

But getting rid of an American accent in French is not just a question of avoiding to pronounce the vowels and consonants of French as you pronounce them in English; but also of riding yourself of native language prosody (rhythm, accent intonation, etc. when you speak French) – an area of great difficulty for pronunciation teachers and language learners alike.

**3 Which variety of French do I select as my model?"** This is a rather contentious issue, especially in American academic circles, where "francophone studies" are so popular. While of course one should attempt to provide American students with many varieties of spoken and written French in authentic contexts for listening practice, for speaking, one should aim for standard French (i.e., the variety used as the model in textbooks, in pronouncing dictionaries, in online French language programs, etc., whose existence is denied by some French phonologists, while others prefer the term *français de référence* (cf. Morin 2000, Durand 2004). The standard variety may differ slightly, or radically, from other French varieties in terms of speakers' choice of mid-vowels, deletion of unstressed schwa, nasal vowel inventory, prosody, and the like (the online French phonology project, *Projet PFC*, offers many interesting samples of spoken varieties of French).

About ten years ago I chose for my French phonetics course a new textbook, with an accompanying CD of auditory exercises. The author stated in the introduction that her model was standard (Parisian) French. Hence all of her rules, examples and exercises would be based on this variety. As far as the explanations and written exercises were concerned, she followed her model. Unfortunately, the same standard was not applied to the auditory part. The author had apparently not thought to select French speakers for the auditory track whose pronunciation corresponded to, or exemplified, the written rules and exercises. So, for example, the whole section on mid-vowels showed a discrepancy between what the students were being taught in the textbook, and what they actually heard when they listened to the recordings. Words like "progrès", *monotone*, *proportion*, for example, were transcribed by the author with an open back vowel [ɔ] in non-final syllables, but were pronounced by the speaker with a very closed [o]; while words like "pose" 'mauve', "grosse", transcribed with a closed vowel [o] by the author in the written exercises (in accordance with various orthographic and phonological rules taught in the textbook), were pronounced with an open [ɔ] by the speaker whose variety of French was characterized by different phonological rules governing choice of mid-vowels. Thus when students heard the words pronounced and were asked to repeat them after the model, or to listen and correct their transcriptions and exercises, they were confused by the lack of congruence between what was being taught and what was being demonstrated. It would appear that the author of this textbook did not pay attention to individual variations in spoken French, or perhaps did not listen to the recordings with an

eye for detail. However, details of this sort, while not grave perhaps for exercises in listening for comprehension, are significant in phonetics training.

My point is not to suggest that one variety of French is inherently better than another; but rather to recommend that teachers be vigilant, and that they be prepared to explain discrepancies that occur to their students, and make the necessary adjustments in their course materials.

**4 Conclusion** The present paper has likely raised more questions than it has answered. Nevertheless, I hope that it has given to aspiring teachers of French some food for thought on the subject of phonetics in pronunciation teaching.

Durand, Jacques & Lyche, Chantal (2004) Structure et variation dans quelques systèmes vocaliques du français. Online article : [[<http://w3.erss.univ-tlse2.fr:8080/index.jsp?perso=jdurand&subURL=>

Morin, Yves (2000) Le français de référence et les normes de prononciation. In Francart et al., *Cahiers de l'institut linguistique de Louvain*, vol. 26, pp. 91-135.

Projet PFC : <http://www.projet-pfc.net/index.php>.