NETPhon: Network for Education and Training in Phonetics

Report on Workshop 1: Curriculum

UCL 26th April 1995

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NETPhon is a Higher Education Discipline Network supported by the Department for Education and Employment, and coordinated at University College London.

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On April 26, 1995, the first of the workshops on the teaching of phonetics to future speech and language therapists, and the use of phonetics by practising therapists, was held at University College, London. The programme of the day's activities is attached (**enclosure 1**).

The first speaker, **Dr. Joe Reynolds** (Leeds Community and Mental Health Services), spoke about the managerial side of speech and language pathology, and outlined the skills desired by employers of new speech and language therapists, the range of competing demands, and the limited scope to address phonetic issues in the service setting (**enclosure 2**). He also addressed the issue of refresher courses for practising therapists who wish to update their skills and/or acquire new expertise in phonetic analysis techniques. Some members of the audience reported that they had carried out such courses with success. Dr. Reynolds alerted us to the psychological barrier presented by "fear of phonetics." Some speech and language therapists apparently equate the science of phonetics with use of IPA symbols and feel inadequate because they don't remember them or have not kept up-to-date with the latest ones, even though it is clear that much practice in the field is of a high standard in its application of phonetics. It was suggested that we teach students to have a broader view of what is involved in the practice of phonetics and to realise that the use of symbols is a peripheral issue. Much disordered speech cannot be adequately described in terms of consonant segments, or of a segmental approach including consonants and vowels; and students should be encouraged to feel comfortable with generous use of diacritics.

Dr. Evelyn Abberton (UCL) then presented, with colleagues **Val Hazan** and **Ginny Wilson**, an overview of the phonetics and acoustics curriculum at University College London (**enclosure 3**). They are striving towards an ideal balance between a) understanding of acoustics, hearing, and phonetic theory and b) practical skills related to production, perception, acoustic analysis, and transcription of normal and disordered speech. It was pointed out that if the therapist is able to make sounds found in disordered speech, he or she can get an important clue to what is going wrong. The teaching at UCL is supported by a variety of computer-based tools, many of which were demonstrated during the lunch break.

We then had a talk by **Sue Pethers** (Addenbrooke's), who is unusual in that she has a degree in linguistics, has taught phonetics, and also has a speech and language therapy qualification. She painted a picture of what it is like to practise in the real world: it is necessary to process as many clients as possible as fast as possible, so the time for in-depth phonetic analysis is rarely available. The phonetic skill which is most useful is quick diagnosis of articulation disorder and speedy and accurate evaluation of whether therapy will be of use. Despite their reported insecurity in phonetic skills, therapists make this kind of evaluation every day, with a high degree of success. Students should therefore be discouraged from compartmentalising their subject areas: all areas of linguistics are used simultaneously in making these

judgements, such that therapists are often unaware that they are using phonetics skilfully. However, the need for refresher courses is definitely real. Making it possible for more than one person in a unit to attend simultaneously may be difficult, so courses should be staggered, or videotapes should be made available.

We had planned to have small group discussions at this point, but the morning session had run over, so a group question-and-answer session was held.

After lunch, **Dr. Janet Beck** (QMC, Edinburgh) reported on the results of a questionnaire which had been instigated by NETphon and sent out to all members of the group about their curriculum. Sites differed in the amount of acoustic phonetics undertaken and the length of courses as well as in the degree to which hearing was seen as a phonetic subject. Some institutions have separate courses in voice disorders and the life history of voice while others do not. Some sites specifically strive to inculcate students with the International Phonetic Alphabet, others regard IPA as desirable, but emphasise that listening skills can be developed independently of transcription skills. The results of the study will be published independently.

Dr. Valérie Hazan (UCL) reported on some work going on within the Erasmus Programme in Phonetics and Speech Communication to develop a curriculum resource for phonetics. The aim is to list the elements that comprise and to a certain degree define this vast area of scientific study. At present, this curriculum takes the form of a set of headings and sub-headings for each of 14 disciplines, from Acoustic Phonetics to Singing. A first version of this resource will appear in a book entitled *European Studies in Speech Communication* (Bloothooft, Hazan, Huber, and Llisteri, eds), due to appear in August 1995, which will also include details of phonetics courses at universities in 25 European countries. A form was circulated which asked for information from representatives of universities teaching courses in phonetics and/or speech communication within the UK.

Linda Shockey (Reading) had received a suggestion from John Wells that his book: *Practical Phonetics*, written with Greta Colson, could serve as a model curriculum for the teaching of phonetics to speech and language therapists, since it had been used successfully in the past. With this as a premise, she described the contents of the book and (with the help of the audience) evaluated them with respect to a) subjects included, and b) order of presentation (**enclosure 4**). Criticisms were made on both counts, but it was duly noted that the book was written in 1971 and that a revised edition would no doubt be different. Linda made the points that

(i) the book is intended for native speakers of English, while our SLT students can be non-natives;
(ii) the book uses phonemic transcription, which is often not helpful in disordered speech;
(iii) it doesn't cover voice types;
(iv) it doesn't cover a large number of sounds which could be of potential use in transcription of disordered speech; and
(v) it uses a stylised type of intonational marking which is phonological rather than phonetic in nature and may not be applicable to disordered speech.

A member of the audience brought up the fact that airstream mechanisms are brought in right

at the beginning of the book when the students are ill-equipped to handle such sophisticated concepts. It was suggested that stop consonants (Wells and Colson Chapter 16) might make a better starting point.

We then broke into three groups to discuss the questions:

1) what is the best system for teaching intonation?
2) to what extent should the phonetics of foreign language be part of a speech and language therapy course?
3) what special techniques are useful for teaching therapists who do not have English as a native language?

We found that time was short for serious discussion of any of these topics, and report-backs included only a list of opinions rather than a considered answer. The first topic was, however, discussed at length and with some passion in the following weeks over the 'phonet' e-mail network.

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