

The hundredth anniversary of the first modern English pronunciation dictionary

Beverley Collins, Leiden University Centre for Linguistics

Inger M. Mees, Copenhagen Business School

b.s.collins@hum.leidenuniv.nl

im.isv@cbs.dk

It is exactly one hundred years ago that a significant event occurred in the history of English phonetics – yet one which is now totally forgotten. In 1909 the first modern English pronunciation dictionary was published. It received little acclaim, and only modest sales, but it was nevertheless a publication which must be regarded as a landmark in the development of our discipline.

John Wells has shown us how important a pronouncing dictionary is for pronunciation teaching at the present day. It is perhaps salutary to remind ourselves of just how indispensable for pronunciation training such a reference work would have been for teachers and learners in that far-off era. There was no television and no radio. The gramophone was in its infancy and films were, of course, silent. Foreign travel was expensive and time-consuming – most people never even considered crossing international frontiers. So learners of a foreign language would have had little or no chance ever to hear it used by a native speaker. For that matter, the same applied to their teachers. Yet, amazingly, no up-to-date English pronunciation dictionary existed.

1 Previous work

English dedicated pronunciation dictionaries – that is those where the indication of pronunciation is their only, or primary, aim – have a long history. The first significant works of this type were produced in the eighteenth century but it must be admitted that earlier examples were of very variable quality (Beal 2008). The most successful was John Walker's (1791) *Critical Pronouncing Dictionary*. Walker's dictionary looks somewhat bizarre to us today – consonants were shown by a system of respelling, while vowels were indicated by superscript numbers so that, for example, *anecdote* came out as **a⁴n¹-e²k-do¹te**. Nevertheless, Walker outsold all his rivals, and indeed continued to appear in various incarnations – including unauthorised copies and pirated imitations – throughout the nineteenth century.

The nineteenth century was actually notable for the absence of any significant new English pronunciation dictionaries (Collins & Mees 2008). A prime reason for this was the lack of any recognised form of phonetic transcription. This was rectified thanks to the efforts of such pioneers as Alexander Melville Bell, Isaac Pitman and Alexander Ellis (see Collins & Mees 2007). In 1877, Henry Sweet's groundbreaking *Handbook of Phonetics* appeared with clearly worked-out notation systems for English and other major languages. A crucial step was the founding of the International Phonetic Association (originally named the Phonetic Teachers' Association) in 1886, and the development over the closing years of the century of a phonetic alphabet which eventually became accepted worldwide (IPA 1999: 194-7), and in essence was very similar to that we use today.

Yet even when good transcription systems were available to them, lexicographers were remarkably reluctant to take advantage of them. One factor hindering progress might have been the hopelessly inadequate pronunciation scheme in the great *Oxford English Dictionary*, the first portions of which came out from 1884 onwards. For whatever reason, no linguist or lexicographer from an English-speaking country was prepared to take on the arduous task of producing a dedicated pronunciation

dictionary, even though Walter Rippman (1906) compiled a long list of about 1,500 transcribed words. Surprisingly it was left to a Swede to do the job. In 1909, one Jon Arvid Afzelius (1856-1918), a little-known but prolific Swedish textbook writer produced the very first reliable modern pronunciation dictionary for English – a book which in many ways set the standard for more famous works to come.

2 Appearance and sources

Afzelius's (1909) *Concise Pronouncing Dictionary of Modern English* (in Swedish *Engelsk Uttalsordbok*) is at first sight misleadingly diminutive – a mere 10 x 15cm. Its compact format was presumably chosen so that it would fit conveniently into a man's coat pocket or tucked into a woman's handbag. Yet it is nearly 500 pages long, and lists around 24,000 headwords, with many more indications of tenses, plurals, compounds, etc. This is by any standard a remarkably high total for a so-called concise dictionary, especially considering that it is the labour of just one man, and that it is the first modern work of its kind. Afzelius had no reliable publications of a similar nature available for him to consult – or pilfer.

Afzelius's little book is unquestionably a dedicated pronouncing dictionary: it dispenses with definitions, and alternative pronunciations are regularly noted where appropriate. It includes place names and personal names. Furthermore, he employs a reliable transcription founded on sound phonetic and phonological principles. Afzelius states that his phonetic representations are 'based partly on the *Oxford Dictionary*, collated with other large dictionaries, partly on phonetic texts and word-lists by [Henry] Sweet, [Laura] Soames, [Georg E.] Fuhrken, [Daniel] Jones, [Richard J.] Lloyd, [Walter] Rippmann'. All of these were notable contemporary phoneticians; see Collins & Mees (2003, 2007) for biographical details and samples of their work. Afzelius adds that he has also drawn on 'my own observations and notes collected during many visits to England and during many years' intercourse with English people' (p. i). In fact, unusually for the era, Afzelius did indeed make many trips to Britain where he undoubtedly kept an observant ear open for the pronunciation usages of the natives.

3 Transcription system

The transcriptions are overwhelmingly accurate, and what weaknesses do emerge are largely in notoriously difficult areas such as stress in place names and compounds. What is most striking about Afzelius's work is the extent to which his representations reflect the reality of colloquial English. Daniel Jones (1910:157) in a very brief review of the dictionary in *Le Maître phonétique* – the leading phonetic journal of the time – writes that 'the pronunciation recorded in most dictionaries is very different from that actually used by most educated people' but notes approvingly that Afzelius's work formed 'an exception to the general rule'.

Afzelius uses what he calls 'a slightly modified form of the phonetic notation employed by Henry Sweet in his *Primer of Spoken English* [1890] and *Elementarbuch des gesprochenen Englisch* [1885]' (p. i). Afzelius's transcription is remarkably efficient for its time, and is basically phonemic in nature – although the term 'phoneme' is not employed since the concept was at the time unknown outside Russia and eastern Europe. An italic font is utilised so as to distinguish transcription from conventional orthography. Afzelius's consonant symbols are in no way unusual except that, following Sweet, he uses þ instead of θ for the voiceless dental fricative. He includes x for the marginal voiceless velar fricative occurring mainly in Scottish words and place names, e.g. *loch*. Following Sweet's practice, vowels in unstressed syllables are indicated by means of a superscript breve. What appears to be an oddity to modern eyes, the use of ɹ (rather than ʌ) for the STRUT vowel, has been taken over from the *Oxford Dictionary* (Sweet employs a). A weak point is that

Afzelius chooses to represent word-final ə in two different ways: orthographic <ah> is shown differently from the same sound spelt either with <a> or <er> as in *saga*, *sister*. Consequently the phonetically identical *Rebecca* and *Rebekah* are not transcribed in the same way. He is clearly hawering on this point since in a footnote (p. viii) he adds ‘if indeed there is a difference’, and he may have been unduly influenced by non-expert native speaker advisors. The stress marking system is simpler than Sweet’s. Afzelius indicates primary stress by a dot before the stressed syllable, whilst secondary stress is left unmarked and is only evident from the vowel notation, with a special marking for compounds.

Afzelius	EPD/LPD	Afzelius	EPD/LPD	Afzelius	EPD/LPD
aa	ɑ:	e ⁱ	eɪ	ɔɔ	ɔ:
v	ʌ	əə	ɜ:	ɔ	ɒ
æ	æ	ə	ə	ɔi	ɔɪ
ai	aʊ	i	ɪ	uu	u:
au	aʊ	ii	i:	u	ʊ
e	e	o ^u	əʊ	ä	eə

Afzelius’s vowel symbolisations compared with those of the current EPD and LPD

In his review, Jones (1910) criticises Afzelius for having opted for his own alphabet, rather than that of the IPA. In fact, Afzelius’s transcription had been used over a long period in a large number of his pedagogic publications; he asserts that the ‘phonetic notation has now been tested for many years in Swedish schools, and has established its practical utility’ (p. i). Given his record of successful textbook authorship, it is likely that this claim was true. Afzelius goes on to say – with clear justification – that ‘its advantages over such a system as Walker’s are obvious’. But, of course, by this time Walker was no longer in the running, and the competition came from the new system backed by the IPA.

4 Why did Afzelius’s dictionary lack impact?

It might be expected that a dictionary such as Afzelius’s would have been welcomed enthusiastically as a boon for teachers and learners of English alike. But it turned out not to be. The dictionary seems to have had almost no impact outside Sweden itself. Without question Afzelius’s work marked a watershed in the history of English lexicography. So why was it largely ignored by the phonetic establishment of the time, and why has its significance not since been better recognised by historiographers? Although there can be no simple answer, we may conjecture three clear reasons for its neglect – and possibly another somewhat less obvious.

To begin with, neither the author nor the publishing house was based in an English-speaking country, so the accuracy of the work might have been doubted in some circles. Secondly, Afzelius was not a recognised phonetician, or even in conventional terms an academic. He held no university post and was largely involved in professional training institutes – he was known as a practising teacher and an educationist, and also as a writer of practical textbooks. A third factor was Afzelius’s rejection of the IPA alphabet and his choice of what was regarded as an outdated and idiosyncratic form of transcription. Although it worked well, it was nevertheless unfashionable. Unlike many of the leading European linguists of the time, he was no longer even a member of the IPA (he joined the organisation in 1888 but had left by 1892). The connection with Sweet would not necessarily have helped; the great scholar, for long notoriously eccentric, and now terminally ill, had made many enemies, and his work was increasingly seen as representative of a bygone era. As we have indicated, there may also be another hidden factor.

5 Afzelius's legacy

The young Daniel Jones – who wrote the cautiously approving but very short review in *Le Maître phonétique* – might not have wholeheartedly welcomed the arrival of Afzelius (1909) in his in-tray. Jones was already engaged on his first lexicographical under-taking, the *Phonetic Dictionary of the English Language* (Michaelis & Jones 1913), and perhaps viewed Afzelius as an unexpected rival. Is it possible that Daniel Jones, and his close colleagues in the IPA elite, treated Afzelius as an unwelcome intruder, and by giving the dictionary minimal attention effectively kicked it into the long grass? Jones is nothing if not fair-minded in his description of Afzelius's effort as 'a praiseworthy attempt to carry out a work of extreme difficulty', but the review is minuscule – a mere half page in length. This was scant recognition for a book which should have been seen as a major step forward in phonetic lexicography. And we have been unable to trace a single mention, subsequent to the appearance of the review in the *Maître phonétique*, we could not trace a single mention of either the man or his work.

In 1909, Jones was perhaps already pondering the possibility of producing something very much on the same lines as Afzelius's effort – this was to emerge many years later as his *English Pronouncing Dictionary*. On its appearance in 1917, the *EPD* (as it is always known) was rightly hailed as a masterly achievement. It is nonetheless curious that amongst all the acknowledgements, sources and copious book lists that Jones includes in his preliminary material, one name is conspicuously absent – once again there is no mention of Afzelius.

The *EPD* sold well from the start and went through no fewer than 14 editions in the twentieth century, being largely unchallenged until the advent of John Wells's (1990) *Longman Pronunciation Dictionary (LPD)*. And in revamped form, the *EPD* is very much with us today. These two works, the *LPD* and the *EPD*, are now unquestionably the leading pronunciation dictionaries of the present day. On the other hand, Afzelius's dictionary is a dead letter – for instance, it seems that there are no copies in any university library anywhere in Britain. Yet it might be considered ironic that so many of the best features of these two excellent modern reference works were originally pioneered by their now completely forgotten predecessor Jon Arvid Afzelius.

6 References

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