

Richard Ogden

An Introduction to English Phonetics

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The book is meant to introduce students and other non-expert readers to the basics of the analysis of spoken language. Using examples from all over the English-speaking world, the book explains how individual sound segments of this language community are produced, phonetically described and classified on acoustic and auditory grounds, and how these descriptions and classifications relate to lexical and other communicative meaning. The first chapter outlines what phonetics is about as a scientific discipline, how it is integrated into the linguistic sciences, and how the content of the book relates to phonetic and linguistic aspects. These general statements are followed in the second and third chapters by brief overviews of the tools of phonetic description, i.e. the anatomy and the physiology of the human speech production apparatus as well as the transcriptions and the acoustic parameters of sound segments. After having laid this foundation, the book turns to the individual sound classes of English and their contributions to conveying various shades of meaning that are involved in speech communication. The fourth chapter deals with phonation, intonation, and phrasing. In chapter 5 the book introduces the vowels, accounting for their role as the fundamental building blocks of speech that influence the phonetic properties of adjacent consonants. The consonants are presented in separate chapters that address approximants (including laterals and rhotics), plosives, fricatives and nasals. The presentation of the main consonant classes is supplemented by a chapter on the occurrences and uses of non-pulmonic sounds in English, i.e. clicks, ejectives and implosives. The main points of the individual chapters are brought together in a conclusion in chapter 11. Complying with the function of a textbook, each chapter ends in a summarizing statement that is complemented by exercises and suggestions for further reading. The

final pages of the book provide a useful glossary and discuss the exercises chapter by chapter.

Regarding the title of the book, it would not be surprising if the spontaneous reaction of a phonetically interested reader was something like ‘Ah, yet another textbook on English phonetics’. However, this textbook takes an unconventional approach. Typical textbooks have a more or less explicit phonological objective. They describe segmental and prosodic sound patterns in order to relate them to distinctive and contextual variations within the (morpho-) phonological system of a standard variety of a language. In contrast, Ogden’s *Introduction to English Phonetics* dares to make compromises between an introduction into phonetics in general and into English in particular, between phonetics and phonology, between a standard variety (like Received Pronunciation) and other social or regional varieties (including Scottish, Australian, American, and Canadian English), between citation forms and spontaneous speech, and between lexical meanings and those meanings that relate to the discourse or to aspects of social interaction. Ogden manages to balance these compromises very well, creating an overall coherent picture.

However, the book shows one imbalance that is even stronger than in many other textbooks on English phonetics. It is focused on sound segments and largely excludes the description of prosodic patterning, which seems to run contrary to the author’s broad and phenomenologically rich perspective. Prosodic patterns are an essential part of English phonetics for at least two reasons. First, they fulfill a number of important functions in speech communication, and the range of discovered forms and functions is constantly growing. Second, a number of studies have shown that the segmental phonetic patterns can hardly be understood without reference to the coinciding prosodic patterns and vice versa. These segment-prosody ties are true for a wide range of phenomena from function words through pitch accentuation and phrasing to speech rhythm.

But, apart from its focus on sound segments, is Ogden’s unconventional approach an advantage or a disadvantage? The answer to this question depends on what the reader wants to

learn from the textbook. If s/he wants to understand how the sound system of Standard British English works, then other textbooks may be more suitable. However, if the reader is primarily interested in learning how the English language *can* sound, then I think there is hardly any other more interesting book. The book is able to stimulate students as well as lay people with an interest in pronunciation or speech interaction to engage in phonetic research, with a keen and critical ear for speaker-specific and variety-specific phonetic details and with a constant reference to communicative meaning. The students and lay people are helped by very useful exercises and literature

references, as well as by the author's overall clear and concise writing style. Moreover, with its mixture of background knowledge and form-meaning relationships from real corpus data, the book can even provide new insights for advanced readers, and it can also be recommended as an informative complement to those readers who already know other textbooks of English.

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