

Chapter 2

History of Phonetics and Phonology in the Field of English Studies

2.1 Phonetic Research

The tradition of phonetic research in Britain started approximately four hundred years ago. Early work in this field can hardly be compared with the phonetic research at present, since works in the early stages dealt especially with the comparison of English sounds with the sounds of other languages to meet the demands of practical language study.

John Palsgrave wrote a French grammar (1530) containing descriptions of French and English sounds. The author distinguished the **sound** and the **letter** and introduced a transcription system.

William Salesbury compared English and Welsh sounds in his *Dictionary in Englyshe and Welshe* (1547). In the 16th and 17th centuries linguists started to observe the relations between the letter and the sound. At that time spelling was not consistent, the same word would be written in different ways according to the usage of the writer.

One phoneme was recorded by **several graphemes** and **one grapheme** represented several phonemes. The gap between pronunciation and spelling was enormous, much more evident than in any other period in the history of English and incomparable with many other languages. The adherents of a spelling reform had to analyze English sounds first to be able to propose a more logical relationship between the sound and its graphic representation.

Thomas Smith (1568) made comments on the aspiration of English plosives and the syllabic nature of /n/ and /l/, and presented a precise description of the articulation of consonants.

John Hart, one of the most important phoneticians of the past, is the author of the work *Orthographie* (1569). In this work he advocated a spelling reform, described the organs of speech and defined vowels and consonants.

In the 17th century orthoepy was addressed by Alexander Gill.

From the 17th century onwards interest in linguistic research started to overshadow a mere interest in spelling reform. At that time comparative studies on sounds of various languages emerged together with classification of sound types and presentation of **systemic relationships between English sounds**.

The predecessors of modern phoneticians in the 17th century were John Wallis, Bishop John Wilkins and Christopher Cooper.

In his principal linguistic work *Grammatica Linguae Anglicanae* (1653) John Wallis intended to help foreigners in the acquisition of English. He made attempts at establishing a general system of classification of sounds in all languages similar to a model of universal categories.

Bishop John Wilkins published *Essay towards a Real Character and a Philosophical Language* (1668). The author described the function of speech organs and presented a classification of sounds which surpassed that of John Wallis.

Christopher Cooper is considered to be the greatest English phonetician of the 17th century. His work *The English Teacher, or the Discovery of the Art of Teaching and Learning the English Tongue* (1687) concentrated on the rules of the pronunciation of English.

In the 18th century the main interest of linguists was centered around the spelling and pronunciation norm, especially in Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755).

Sir William Jones is considered to be the first really scientific phonetician, and influenced Ellis and Bell in the 19th century.

Alexander John Ellis based his work on a systematic study of English pronunciation and English dialects of the time. Ellis wrote a compendium *On Early English Pronunciation* (1869-1889) which looked at the history of English pronunciation and contemporary English dialects. His transcription system – known as *Paleotype* – is derived from the Latin and Greek alphabets. Ellis also developed other types of transcription, namely *Glossic* and, together with Isaac Pitman, *Phonotype*.

Alexander Melville Bell was a lecturer on speech at the University of London. He published the book *Visible Speech* (1867) which contains a classification of sounds accompanied by a unique transcription system made up of non-alphabetic symbols applied to the teaching of the deaf.

Henry Sweet was a disciple of Ellis and Bell. He revised the transcription system invented by Bell in his *Revised Visible Speech*. Later he returned to the alphabetic system of transcription and developed a system called *Romic* based on the Latin alphabet. There were two versions of this system, namely *Broad*

Romic and *Narrow Romic*. Broad Romic can be characterized as a phonemic transcription, whilst Narrow Romic is a more detailed phonetic transcription.

Sweet is the author of several well-known works on English phonetics, such as *A Primer of Spoken English* (1911) and *History of English Sounds* (1888).

In 1887 the **International Phonetic Association** accepted Sweet's Romic transcription system as the basis of official phonetic transcription.

Among the 20th century phoneticians Daniel Jones won recognition for his well-known works on English pronunciation, such as *An Outline of English Phonetics* (1964), *The Pronunciation of English* (1966), and above all, his *Everyman's English Pronouncing Dictionary* (1st edition 1917). He also made a contribution to the development of phonology with his work *The Phoneme, its Nature and Use* (1950).

The tradition of English phonetics has been carried on by A.C.Gimson whose book *An Introduction to the Pronunciation of English* (3rd edition 1980) has become a classic in the field of phonetics, paying due regard to the phonological aspect.

J.D.O'Connor has enriched the scope of phonetic literature with his lucid *Phonetics* (1973) and several practical handbooks of pronunciation, namely *A Course of English Pronunciation* and *A Course of English Intonation* (BBC courses), *Better English Pronunciation* (1967) and, in collaboration with G.F.Arnold, *Intonation of Colloquial English* (1961).

At present the most important contribution to phonetic research is being made by the works of J.C. Wells, especially in his 3-volume *Accents of English* (1982). *Longman Pronunciation Dictionary* (1990) is his most appreciated work for general use.

General phonetics is the main field of interest of D. Abercrombie, who is the author of *Elements of General Phonetics* (1967).

2.2 Phonological Research

In Greek linguistics the unit capable of forming meaningful entities was called "the primary element" (stoicheon).

In the Middle Ages Thomas Aquinas supported the view that it is possible to mediate meaning through speech sounds.

Before Aquinas, however, in the 12th century, an anonymous Icelandic scholar wrote a treatise called *The First Discussion on Grammar*. This work includes principles of phonological analysis and its application. The work remained unknown until 1818. Yet it did not reach Europe and thus could not influence linguistic thinking in its orientation towards phonology.

Foundations of Modern Phonological Research

Jean Baudouin de Courtenay was the founder of the Kazaň School. He worked in universities in Russia and in Poland. In his works he combined the abstract and the applied mainstream of linguistics and developed a new type of linguistic theory.

Even during the early years of his scientific endeavour he embarked on the search for something general – the **phoneme** (not merely the sound as a concrete real substance in language). He also addressed the problem of the **mutual relationship between the sound and the phoneme**.

His work can be subdivided roughly into two periods. During the first period, in the 1870s and 1880s, his approach to the solution of the problem can be characterized as **morphological**. His analysis of the phoneme was based on its function within the morpheme. His attention was devoted especially to the **phonetic and historical alternation**.

The result of his work in this period is *An Attempt at the Theory of Phonetic Alternations* (1881). His morphological approach of that period influenced Trubetzkoy and the phonologists of the Moscow Phonological School.

During the second period, in the 1890s, Baudouin abandoned his morphological conception of the phoneme and tried to find the phoneme as a unit independent of the morpheme. In his new conception the **phoneme** is grasped as a **sound image** which is pictured in the mind of the individual during the perception of a certain sound on the basis of a complex of articulatory movements and the corresponding acoustic impression. The phonological conception of the second period was further developed by Baudouin's disciples N.V. Kruszewski and L.V. Ščerba.

N.V. Kruszewski was the first to use **the term phoneme**. In his conception the phoneme was interpreted as the sound image.

L.V. Ščerba continued in the tradition of Baudouin. Ščerba defined phonemes as sound images but contrary to Baudouin he mentioned **generalized images**. He went a step further by **relating sound images to semantic images**. He was the first scholar in the history of linguistics to understand the phoneme as a unit capable of word and morpheme distinctions, and he contrasted the phoneme with the phoneme variant (the latter being deprived of the ability to make a distinction in meaning).

In later years Ščerba reevaluated his conception of the phoneme and his final definition is the following:

The phoneme is the sound type having the ability to distinguish words and their forms and thus serving the needs of human communication.

Phoneme variants are sound variants which are really uttered; they are the individual representing the general.

The phoneme incorporates the unity between the individual and the general, i.e. the individual sounds which are uttered and their generalized reflection in the mind of the language user.

The phoneme also incorporates the unity between the concrete and the abstract. The phoneme is an abstract unit and its concrete materialization is that of sound.

Roots of Phonology in British Phonetics

Henry Sweet in his *Handbook of Phonetics* (1877) explains sound differences "corresponding to the difference in meaning" and "other differences which are not significant and cannot change the meaning". Even before Sweet, however, Pitman and Ellis came to the conclusion that "no letter represents absolutely the same sound except in connection with the same letters" (Phonotype).

In the phonetic transcription system of the International Phonetic Association the rule is applied according to which "every sound which can change the meaning of the word if it is used in the place of another sound, must correspond to a different letter" (IPA Alphabet).

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