

Phonetics

A Contemporary Approach

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Dedicated to Jeffrey R. Snelson, a grandson who had everything going for him until cancer took his life at age 23.

He will always be an inspiration to those who knew him.

A percentage of the royalties from this book will be donated to cancer research.

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Preface

The study of phonetics encompasses much more than just the ability to recognize the sound/symbols of a language and to develop the skill to transcribe human utterances accurately.

A parallel can be drawn between phonetics and language skills. There are two levels of competency in language usage. One is *performance*, which is the ability of an individual to communicate effectively. The second level is the ability to understand and explain why and how certain language rules apply. This is referred to as *metalinguistics*. These same concepts can be applied to the study of phonetics.

Phonetic performance is the ability to listen to a speaker and accurately transcribe the spoken utterances. *Metaphonetics*, if you will, is the acquired knowledge as to why utterances are spoken the way that they are. This includes an understanding of the historical significance of the origins of words and their pronunciation and spelling (Example: Why do some words contain silent letters?) and the anatomical structures that influence the manner in which the air flow is modified, the placement of the articulators, and whether or not the sound is voiced or unvoiced.

In the past, the study of phonetics focused on the development of skills to identify speech sound errors (articulation errors). Recently, it has proven valuable in the identification of phonological processing development and errors. Currently, the study of phonetics has taken on an additional role, that of its relationship to overall literacy, including spelling, reading, and writing.

Phonetics: A Contemporary Approach offers information regarding the historical background of United States English and its dialects. It presents a comprehensive discussion regarding the interrelationship of phonetics and spelling and pronunciation. Dictionary uses and misuses are also discussed.

The organization of the content of the book is based on proven educational learning principles. Because one of the goals of students taking a phonetics course is for them to become competent in sound/symbol recognition, the complete sounds and their phonetic symbols are presented in Chapter 2 rather than throughout the book. This allows the student more time to acquire the skill and reduces the early anxiety that many students have.

The consonant sounds and their phonetic symbols are initially presented in a sequence where those with phonetic symbols that equate to the same alphabet letter come first. For example, the [b] and [p] sound/symbols are presented before the unfamiliar phonetic symbols, such as the *th* sound [θ]. This allows the student to acquire new information using “familiar” knowledge to assist in the acquisition process.

The sequence of presentation of the vowels and diphthongs follows the same learning principle. They are initially presented in the *traditional* orientation of *front, mid, back*, but the actual study of the vowels and diphthongs is based on attaching to the student’s past knowledge of vowel sounds from a *long* and *short vowel* orientation. Thus, the presentation of the vowels is grouped as long vowels, short vowels, and other vowels.

Another educational learning principle is the application of *similarities* and *differences* to gain knowledge and understanding of new information. This principle is applied in the introduction of the *three R sounds*. Rather than presenting these three different sounds with the same alphabet letter in the traditional manner in the vowel and consonant sections of a book, these three sounds are presented in a separate chapter with the intentional purpose of demonstrating their *similarities* and *differences*.

An exciting inclusion in *Phonetics: A Contemporary Approach* is the skill-building activities, which adapt

Preface

familiar card and board games to the learning of phonetics. In addition, phonetic symbol riddles, word searches, dice, and other game techniques make learning the sounds and their phonetic symbols fun.

STANDARD ENGLISH

Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary defines *Standard English* as “the English that with respect to spelling, grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary is substantially uniform though not devoid of regional differences, that is well established by usage in the formal and informal speech and writing of the educated and that is widely recognized as acceptable wherever English is spoken and understood.”

During the 1950s and 1960s, there was the *attitude* that if one did not speak Standard English, he or she used substandard speech, with the connotation that something was wrong—not “different” but substandard. As recently as 1996, W. Bryce Evans (*Phonics-Phonetics*) published a list of words to indicate their “Incorrect and Correct” pronunciation in various dialects in the United States. Give it a try. Which do you say?

women	=	womin	women
winter	=	winder	winter
months	=	mons	months

Years ago when I took a phonetics course, it was drilled into me that the *wh* sound in *when, where, why* had a distinct aspiration of airflow. We would place a thin piece of paper in front of our mouths to visually see the air move the paper. Now, that sound has almost become extinct. There has also been a shift in the use of the [ɑ] sound, such as the first sound in *above* [ɑ-bove]. Instead of saying [open], the more common pronunciation is [opɑn].

And, then there is the ongoing battle I have with my colleagues, who, in my estimation, violate the cardinal rule of phonetics: “Transcribe the sounds as they are spoken.” They were taught, as was I, that the last sound in such words as *city* is the same sound as the first sound in *it* regardless of how the word is spoken by the speaker. It was an arbitrary rule! The long *ee* sound has almost entirely replaced the first sound in *it* in the pronunciation of such words as *city*. I hope we can delete that archaic (and erroneous) rule.

I think it was Charles VanRiper, an early pioneer in our field, who defined a speech defect thusly, “A speech defect occurs when it calls attention to itself.” In the strictest application of this definition, does that mean that we all have a speech defect when we are speaking to a listener who is not from the same dialect region as we are and he or she is focused more upon *how* we are speaking rather than upon *what* we are saying?

It is somewhat amusing to me when I observe students beginning a class in phonetics. They learn from their peers that not everyone speaks the same way, and it is an eye-opener. Such a situation promotes a discussion on *differences*. It is not wrong when one says *Chicago*, pronouncing the first sound like the first sound in *chair* or the first sound in *shoe*. Students learn that there may be several different ways to pronounce a word and they are all correct by using regional dialects as a standard.

People make subconscious judgments about an individual as soon as they hear the person's spoken words. As listeners, we judge a speaker's character just by how that person pronounces words; any variation from Standard English diminishes that person in our opinion. May we not be found making erroneous judgments and instead focus on *what* is said rather than *how* it is said, and transcribe it accordingly.

Enjoy your adventures in PHONETICS!

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He began his professional career as a speech and language specialist in the public schools in southern California. He is the author of the Fullerton Language Test for Adolescents and the author and co-author of several books, including *Your Child's Intellect*, which

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