

# Book Review

Laurie Bauer, John M. Dienhart, Hans H. Hartvigson and Leif Kvistgaard Jacobsen, *American English Pronunciation*. Gyldendal, Copenhagen 1980. 265 pp + bibliography, subject index, word index & charts. Supplement: *Comparison with Danish*. 38 pp.

The appearance of this new textbook for learners of American English (AE) is undoubtedly a welcome event for any teacher or student engaged in this field. *American English Pronunciation* (AEP) takes for granted the dominance of British English (BE) as a pronunciation standard in most European English departments and assumes that an explicit point-by-point comparison with BE is in itself meaningful in characterizing AE. It is thus a textbook designed for the European learner of AE and would appear less useful for a student not familiar with RP, say, in Latin America or in the Far East. This affinity with the BE tradition is evident also in parts of the theoretical exposition where, possibly in an effort to bridge the gap between the descriptive systems for BE and AE, various kinds of compromise solutions have been attempted, not always successfully.

There are fourteen chapters in all. The physiological and acoustic foundations are treated in chs. 1 and 14, and the phoneme in ch. 2. Then there is a major section on the segmental description of consonants and vowels (chs. 3-8) followed by a somewhat heterogeneous section on suprasegmental phenomena (chs. 9-13). The latter includes chapters on syllable structure, assimilation and coarticulation (misleadingly entitled "Articulatory description") as well as two major chapters on stress and intonation.

The general layout of the book is relatively clear, with line drawings, tables and charts to accompany the rather terse technical descriptions. The approach taken is that of a technical reference manual organized typically into series of one-liners preceded by a number or letter rather than the continuous prose paragraphs of a textbook. As a result the exposition becomes very clear and precise but for that very reason also choppy and repetitious. Many points referred to in describing the articulation of a given segment are not individually distinctive or characteristic but derive from general facts about classes of segments. Redundancy is sometimes a useful pedagogical device, but despite Jones' precedent in this matter there seems to be a loss of generalization when for each individual vowel the vibration of the vocal cords and the blocking of the nasal passage have to be stated. Such information would be essential in a description of Japanese or French vowels, respectively, but for English these facts fall out automatically. Similarly, one wonders about the need for pointing out, meticulously, that each *double* consonant in spelling represents only a *single* occurrence of the corresponding symbol in phonemic transcription.

On the other hand, the articulatory description is occasionally felt to be less than informative, as when each of the *lenis* consonants is dismissed with the following standard formula: "Apart from the fact that x is *lenis* whereas y is *fortis*, these two sounds are articulated in the same way (see description under y)" (pp. 35, 41, 46, 52, 58, 60, 64 and 68). This valuable

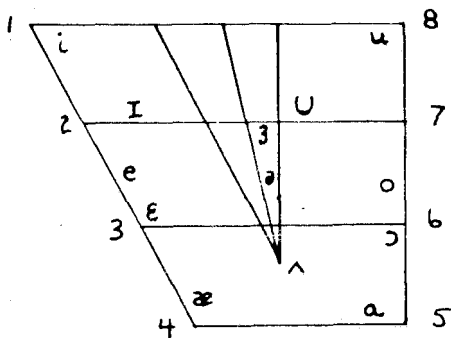


Fig. 1

The feature "Mid;" is now planted between Half-close and Half-open without any specific justification or discussion of the internal relationships holding between the two sets (Fig. 2).

	Front	Central	Back
Close	i		⊙ u
Half-close	I	ɜ	⊙ U
Mid	e	ə	⊙ o
Half-open	ɛ	ʌ	⊙ ɔ
Open	æ		a

Fig. 2

This juxtaposition may well turn out to be a stroke of genius, since each vowel phoneme now has its own "box" defined in terms of only two intersecting categories. Thus one avoids the rather cumbersome references to "Higher mid-front/Lower mid-front" (cf. Kenyon) or the employment of the "Tense/Lax" distinction (cf. Bronstein) which, incidentally, is given short shrift on p. 100.

But there may be a price to pay for this structural neatness. Using terms drawn from Fig. 2, one is unable to capture the distinction of height between /I/ and /U/ on the one hand, and /ɜ/ on the other, which are clearly indicated in Fig. 1 as being located respectively above and below the strict Half-close position. The discrepancy becomes even more noticeable with /ɛ/, /ɜ/ and /ʌ/, which must all be characterized as "Half-open" according to Fig. 2 but are shown with three different heights on Fig. 1.

space could be filled by a concise and relevant description of the segment under consideration.

Typographical quality is reasonably good, with one or two very important exceptions. I find it incredible that the IBM Composer is not sophisticated enough to handle standard phonemic transcriptions – forms like /sIbIIŋ/ and /həUzIz/ are simply unacceptable! Some of the hand-drawn symbols and diacritics likewise leave something to be desired in the way of clarity and neatness, but on the whole these are minor points which, I trust, will be improved in a future edition. There are relatively few misprints and other errata. The charts on p. 101 have been reversed, p. 158 has *symbol* for *syllable*, and p. 226 has one occurrence of *unmarked* where *marked* would seem appropriate.

I will now proceed to a more detailed examination of matters that I consider to be of more central importance, both theoretically and pedagogically. They concern certain technical terms chosen, the descriptive framework established and a few of the phonological interpretations selected (from among several possible) by the authors of AEP.

The phoneme can of course be defined in a variety of ways, some of which are incompatible. For textbook purposes one needs only a simple working-definition, but the authors have managed to create an unnecessary stumbling block for any reflecting student by defining it as "a group of sounds" and "thus an abstract unit" in the same paragraph (p. 14). This definition runs into problems later on but does not crucially impede the exposition.

In the consonant description the distinction between "active and passive articulator" is maintained throughout. This terminology makes good sense for consonant types with a central place of articulation but becomes a little strained when applied to the peripheral ones. It is not obvious that the upper lip is "passive" in bilabial pronunciation, and describing /h/ and /ʔ/ in terms of the vocal cords functioning as "both active and passive articulators" (p. 22) is simply absurd.

Labels used for various types of sound are largely drawn from the traditional set. The terms "semivowel" and "frictionless continuant" have been discarded, and while neither category is particularly well defined, the adoption of Ladefoged's term "Approximant" does not appear to make the description any clearer. "Approximation" as a general term is used in characterizing a variety of articulations. Fricatives are described as having a "stricture of close approximation" (p. 54), while all vowels and semivowels have a "stricture of open approximation" (p. 72). Why single out a small subset of these as referents for the term "approximant"?

The descriptive framework for vowels established in AEP is a clear example of the compromise solutions alluded to above. Instead of the standard grid of High/Mid/Low generally used by American phoneticians (and earlier by Henry Sweet), AEP introduces a "hybrid variant based on Jones' modified version of the IPA diagram where height is indicated as Close/Half-close/Half-Open/Open, these terms being associated with the areas traversed by the lines connecting Cardinal vowels no. 1 and 8, 2 and 7, 3 and 6, and 4 and 5 respectively (cf. Fig. 1).

As another example of such seemingly haphazard and arbitrary labeling, there is an accompanying loss of "relatedness" between for instance /ɜ/ and /a/, which are "Half-close" and "Mid", respectively. Again one looks in vain for an explanation or justification of the relationship between the two sets. Is it one of phonetics vs. phonemics, or what?

Another suspected casualty is the /ɝ/-phoneme, which has been relegated to a phonetic realization of either /a/ or /ɔ/ (more on this below). Since /a/ occupies the "Open" and /ɔ/ the "Half-open" position, what else can one do?

This leads naturally to a consideration of the selections the authors of AEP have made among several available phonological interpretations of the Low-back vowels and of the Central vowels in combination with /r/, both of which have been the subject of lengthy and inconclusive discussions among students of American speech. As for the status of /ɝ/, this does not depend so much on the precise *contrasts* which can be established between it and /a/-/ɔ/, since judgments are notoriously vague in the Low-back area (cf. Kurath et al.) and regional types reflect a variety of distinctions. It depends rather on one's *choice of reference group*, on deciding which of the regional variants is representative. One may choose to ignore variants with a full-fledged three-way distinction or one may ignore those with only a two-way one, but one cannot simply put the matter at rest by announcing that "there is no phoneme /ɝ/ in AE" (p. 103). There is more to it than that, and I suspect that the choice made in AEP has been influenced by consideration of the overall system referred to above.

The relationship between the Mid-central vowels and /r/ is without doubt the central problem in AE phonology, and AEP presents a clear and instructive survey of the various options available and their advocates (p. 91 ff). Between Trager & Smith's one-phoneme solution and Kenyon & Knott's five-phoneme one there is a variety of alternatives, most of which recognize three, but even so several solutions are possible. AEP has chosen a very clean-cut analysis in factoring out the so-called "r-coloring" from the vocalic elements, leaving /r/ as an independent consonant phoneme in all contexts and /ɜ/-/a/ as separate uncontaminated vowel phonemes. This solution allows for a neat phonemic transcription, exemplifiable as /fɜr/ (fur) and /fɑðər/ (father). It resolves the problem of deciding whether a given segment is a vowel or a consonant, and it "makes for ease of comparison with British English and other r-less dialects, as explicitly pointed out by the authors (p. 92). The existence of assimilated forms where the Mid-central vowels are fused with /r/ is in this analysis acknowledged not at the phonemic but at the *phonetic* level. So far so good.

The authors are aware, however, of some of the drawbacks of this particular way of dividing the cake. On the theoretical side, it is very disturbing to have one special phoneme which occurs only before /r/. Another consequence is seen in the checked/unchecked bipartition of vowels, where /ɜ/ is likewise ill at ease in being formally a checked vowel while "its phonetic manifestation [ɝ̆] may occur without a following consonant ..." (p. 120). But on the whole, these are minor objections to an analysis which is theoretically very attractive.

The most serious drawbacks of this analysis, however, are encountered

on the pedagogical side. Transcribing *fur* as /fɜr/ is, I will argue, downright misleading, since it suggests to the foreign learner that we have a linear/temporal *sequence* of two segments, first the vowel /ɜ/ and then the consonant /r/. For the overwhelming majority of rhotic dialects of AE this is simply false, as admitted even by AEP: "In such words the articulation of /r/ begins simultaneously with the articulation of the vowel ...' (p. 85). A textbook whose aim is "primarily pedagogical" (p. 1), seeking, presumably, to dispel the widespread misconception that speaking AE simply means "adding the r's" should not, in my opinion, encourage a transcription which reinforces that misconception.

AEP's treatment of stress and intonation remains to be considered. The chapter on stress is very well worked out and represents a practical adaptation of generative approaches to stress assignment, in my judgment perhaps the most valuable contribution made by the present work. Starting from the assumption that English word stress is essentially rule-governed, the authors proceed to spell out the underlying principles of stress placement involving notions like root, affix, and number of syllables. The treatment of compounds and weak forms is particularly interesting and useful, although the amount of detail in the chapter as a whole probably exceeds the grasp of the average undergraduate student.

Intonation receives a detailed and comprehensive treatment in ch. 13. To anyone well versed in standard descriptions of BE intonation the account no doubt makes good sense, but representing as it does an incomplete adaptation of the "dots-and-dashes" system to a different frame of reference, I find it less than satisfactory — or, more specifically, I think it creates more problems than it solves. An elaborate machinery of seven simple and two complex nuclear patterns allows for many more patterns than one is likely to need or use in describing AE intonation. Ignoring many points of specific detail, I would argue in general that this descriptive machinery overdifferentiates the underlying reality of American speech patterns which, as admitted by the authors, "may seem unduly phlegmatic to BE-speakers" (p. 234). The general difference between AE and BE intonation is demonstrated very nicely on p. 235, suggesting in fact that AE could do with a considerably simplified (or more highly stylized) marking system. What I have in mind here is the technique developed by Pike, the absence of whose name from the bibliography is rather conspicuous in view of the extremely few contributions which have been made to the study of AE intonation. Experience in teaching AE intonation using both "dots and dashes" and Pike's notation has convinced me of the greater suitability and usefulness of the latter.

In conclusion, AEP is a welcome contribution to a textbook market which has not exactly been overcrowded. It contains a wealth of interesting information and stimulating observations on the most widely spoken variant of English — and thus, not surprisingly, the least homogeneous standard accent to analyse and describe. As indicated by my largely negative remarks above, I consider the authors of AEP only moderately successful, not only in their attempt to provide a theoretically consistent foundation for their account (admittedly not a central concern) but also in presenting it in a pedagogically useful form (which has been their primary purpose).

In addition to its many undoubtedly positive aspects AEP contains a number of points which I am critical of but which could be easily improved in a future edition. But its most fundamental shortcoming, in my opinion, is not so easily rectified. Judged as a textbook for non-native (particularly non-European) learners of American English, AEP is marked (and marred) by the authors' close identification with the British tradition and by their general tendency towards compromise solutions. The pronunciation of American English is sufficiently distinctive to deserve a description based on its own premises, not on those of another pronunciation.

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