

*The English Teacher* Vol XVIII September 1989

## **J.C. Catford (1988) *A Practical Introduction to Phonetics***

Oxford University Press (239pp.)

**Reviewed by Adam Brown.**

Any new publication on phonetics by J.C. Catford is to be warmly welcomed. As the book cover rightly states, he 'is widely regarded as the leading practical phonetician of our time'. The present work is an introductory book on phonetics, building on the technical foundation laid down in his 1977 book *Fundamental Problems in Phonetics* and subsequent research.

Catford is quick to point out in his Preface that this book is entitled *A Practical Introduction to Phonetics* and not *An Introduction to Practical Phonetics*. That is, the topic of the book is general or theoretical phonetics, which is approached in a practical way. A basic knowledge of general phonetics, Catford argues, is of use to many groups: students of linguistics and languages, comparative historical linguists, speech pathologists and therapists, teachers of the deaf, the hearing-impaired themselves, communications and computer scientists, actors, and so on. 'The teacher of languages ... including the teacher of English as a second language, must be able to diagnose the pronunciation errors made by students, and to devise means of correcting them - this is impossible without both theoretical and practical knowledge of phonetics' (p.1).

Few would deny this. However, many might argue as to the extent and depth of understanding required by the ESL teacher. There are several topics covered in the book which fall outside the central interest of ESL, e.g. non-pulmonic airstreams, flaps, uvular and pharyngeal articulations, secondary cardinal vowels, the acoustics of vowels. The fact that these technical terms will be unfamiliar to the average ESL teacher reading this review suggests that they fall within the domain of general phonetics rather than of ESL.

It is widely accepted nowadays that the reason why some learners of English continue to sound foreign and remain unintelligible is as much to do with the suprasegmental features of stress, rhythm, intonation and voice quality, as it is with the segmental consonant and vowel features, on which attention has traditionally been concentrated (see my article in this issue). Bolinger has criticised this traditional emphasis on segmentals succinctly as follows:

'If the child could paint the picture, [rhythm and intonation] would be the wave on which the other components ride up and down; but the linguist is older and stronger, and has his way - he calls them suprasegmentals, and makes the wave ride on top of the ship.'

(Bolinger, 1961, quoted by Gilbert, 1984:1-2)

It is unfortunate then that Catford follows the traditional pattern, devoting most of Chapter 3 and all of Chapters 4 to 8 (some 130 pages) to segmentals, while suprasegmentals (called prosodic features) command only 14 pages near the end of the book in Chapter 9. This is followed in Chapter 10 by discussion of the sound systems of different languages, again almost exclusively at the segmental level.

Catford's account of rhythm owes much to the theory of Abercrombie (e.g. 1967:96ff.). This theory held sway in the 1960s and 70s but has gradually been eroded by the failure of investigators to find confirming evidence for the theory. It is widely considered nowadays to be only a pedagogically convenient fiction (see Roach, 1982; Faber, 1986; Brown, 1988). Catford would seem to be the ideal person to put straight the facts of English rhythm.

The book is a practical introduction. As with Ladefoged (1982), it 'is a course in phonetics, not a book about phonetics' (Ladefoged, 1982:vii). The explanation of phonetic concepts takes the form of 124 experiments which the reader is invited to perform using his own vocal apparatus. These experiments are based on performance exercises which Catford has perfected during his years at the University of Michigan. The rationale is that the reader may learn only so much from verbal descriptions, but that his understanding will be deeper if it is based on introspection and investigation of his own performance, with the aim of bringing articulatory gestures under conscious control.

'Breathe in, and start saying [ffffff]. While carefully maintaining the lip-teeth articulatory contact, suddenly stop breathing out - i.e. abolish the initiatory airstream. Take care to retain the articulation for at least 5 seconds after you have abolished the initiation. Now repeat the experiment with an [si-articulation. Breathe in, start up [sssssi then, while carefully maintaining the [s]-articulation, suddenly abolish the initiation - i.e. stop breathing out. Retain the [s]-articulation for another 5 seconds or so after you have abolished the initiation'. (p.14)

Malaysians could do worse than to carry out this experiment using the [0] sound. That experiment is typical of those contained in the book, and demonstrates the componential approach adopted. All sounds involve two basic components - initiation (an airstream) and articulation. A third component (phonation, i.e. voicing) is optional, as it is not involved in certain sounds, i.e. voiceless ones. Such a componential approach is an ideal way of countering the holistic way in which speech sounds are generally viewed by the phonetically untrained. Numerous diagrams and tables illustrate the approach.

There are many competing introductions to phonetics on the market. It is surprising, therefore, that Catford chooses to recommend two of these (Ladefoged, 1982; Abercrombie, 1967) extensively as further reading.

Catford's book is an excellent practical introduction to segmental general phonetics. Particularly pleasing are the experiments it contains. It is thus very suitable for undergraduate courses in phonetics and for groups such as speech therapists. However, its concentration on segmental features of speech at the expense of suprasegmentals, and the fact that it deals with several physiological possibilities which are not widespread in languages of the world, mean that its usefulness for ESL teachers is limited.

## References

- Abercrombie, D. (1967), *Elements of General Phonetics* Edinburgh University Press.
- Bolinger, D.L. (1961), *Forms of English* Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass.
- Brown, A. (1988), 'The staccato effect in the pronunciation of English in Malaysia and Singapore' in J. Foley (ed.) *New Englishes : the Case of Singapore*, Singapore University Press.
- Catford, J.C. (1977), *Fundamental Problems in Phonetics* Edinburgh University Press.
- Faber, D. (1986), 'Teaching the rhythms of English: a new theoretical base' *International Review of Applied Linguistics* 24:205-216.
- Gilbert, J.B. (1984), *Clear Speech* Cambridge University Press.
- Ladefoged, P. (1982), *A Course in Phonetics* (2nd edition) Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York.
- Roach, P. (1982) 'On the distinction between "stress-timed" and "syllable-timed" languages' in D. Crystal (ed.) *Linguistic Controversies* Edward Arnold, London.