AN ENGLISH PHONETICS COURSE

by

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PREFACE

This book is intended for use in university and teacher training courses in English pronunciation. The students particularly envisaged are West Africans. A number of universities and university colleges in Africa include a test of spoken English and some knowledge of phonetic theory among their requirements for intermediate or final degrees. Students attending such courses should find this book useful. While setting out the elements of phonetics, it gives practical guidance on how to overcome the special difficulties that Africans encounter in their pronunciation of English.

With its practical bias the book should be particularly useful to those who will be going out some day to teach English in the schools. If the standard of spoken English is to be improved, as it needs to be improved in many places, the main burden of that task must be borne by the schools. To ensure that the right habits are formed at an age when it is easy to learn a new set of sounds, some form of speech training should begin with the very first lesson in English, and it should continue throughout the school career. To carry out this speech training, the teacher needs to know not only that a given pronunciation is wrong, but in what way it is wrong; he needs some background knowledge of how the speech organs work. But the school English course should not become a course in phonetic theory; the emphasis in the schools should be all the time on the practical aspect. The teacher should not require his class to know about front and back vowels and narrow and wide diphthongs; his job is to see to it, by whatever

means may seem best suited, that the pupils make the right sounds in the right places. If a pupil's pronunciation is correct, the best thing is probably to leave him in happy ignorance of how the sounds have been produced. If the pupil uses an incorrect vowel, the teacher may find it useful to tell him to flatten or raise the tongue more, to round or unround the lips, or to make the sound more like this and less like that other sound, and so on; but he should not give the class a lecture on the theory of vowels. A good teacher should know more than he ever passes on to his pupils.

An example may make this clear. One can use the method described in § 103 for learning to say [æ] without telling the class anything about the general difference between front and back vowels. But it needs of course to be emphasized to the class that this particular sound is said with the front part of the tongue.

Frequent and regular use of phonetic transcription is a great help at all levels. Schoolchildren are less tempted to say [kɔtɔn] for *cotton* when they are used to seeing it transcribed as [kɔtn].

A textbook must perforce be somewhat sweeping and dogmatic. The need to simplify, and in some cases to suppress, lays it open to criticism which can only be met by pleading expediency. To those English-speakers who may find perfectly good pronunciations of theirs neglected or ignored I offer my apologies: I had to be selective. I should also like to point out that the various diagrams of the speech organs given in this book do not pretend to a naturalistic accuracy. To drive home the lessons they are intended to teach the more effectively, certain details have been simplified or omitted.

I am aware that what I say in § 5 about the ideal to be aimed at in the teaching of English pronunciation may seem

to conflict with the view held by most phoneticians in Africa, who would like to see a kind of Educated African English established. This conflict is, I think, more apparent than real. Even if Received Pronunciation (or "R.P.", Standard English, or whatever one chooses to call it) is the aim, the result in the majority of cases will have a certain African flavour, enough to qualify for the description Educated African English. But the model, for a long time to come, must remain Received Pronunciation. I have developed this view in *Bilingualism* (Methuen, 1949), pp. 14–15, and "The Problem of Spoken English" (*Oversea Education*, April 1954), p. 25.

The present book is based on personal observation over a number of years of the way in which Africans speak English. The description of English usage, though equally based on personal observation, owes a great deal to the work of pioneers like Daniel Jones, Ida C. Ward and H. E. Palmer. I am also indebted to Mr. P. D. Strevens, of the University College of the Gold Coast, for a number of very useful suggestions, and to Mr. J. Carnochan, of the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, for his comments on the manuscript.

The vowel chart in Fig. 14 has been adapted from C. M. Doke, *The Southern Bantu Languages* (Oxford University Press, 1954), p. 27. Acknowledgement is due to the publishers for permission to use this chart.

P. C.

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PART I

GENERAL

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

§ 1. A language may be said to be a method by which a person expresses his thoughts and feelings in such a way that they can be understood by others. Language is, as we say, a means of communication. Some languages, such as English or Russian or Chinese, are used both in speech and in writing; others, for example some of the African languages, have not yet got an accepted orthography and are used mostly, or only, in speech. In this book we shall study the way in which we speak, and in particular the way English is spoken.

§ 2. When we speak, we produce a succession of sounds arranged in groups which we call words, and each word has a definite meaning in the minds of the persons using that language. But to somebody who does not know that language the words convey no meaning; every language on earth has its own particular set of words, most of which are quite different from those of any other language. To learn another language you must learn the words that make up that language, and to speak the language well you must use those words only; it will not do to mix them up with words from your mother tongue.

§ 3. Just as each language has its own set of words, different from those of other languages, so each language has its own set of sounds, different from the set used in any other language. If we compile a list of all the words in a language, we shall get what is called its *vocabulary*; and if we draw up a list of all the different sounds used in that language, we shall get what is called its *sound system.* It should be clearly understood that the sound system of a language is peculiar to that language, and that no other language has exactly the same system. For instance, if we compare two languages, say Yoruba and Fante, or Ganda and Somali, or French and English, we shall find that some of the sounds are very similar or even identical, but others are quite different, and usually there are far more differences than similarities. Very often, too, we find that one language has more sounds than another. Take, for example, the vowels of some different languages. Spanish has five distinct vowel sounds, English and French have twelve each, and German has fourteen. Many African languages have seven vowels, but others have only five, and others again have nine or more. This alone is sufficient to give you some idea of the possible differences between sound systems. Even in the case of English and French, which have the same number of vowel sounds, no single vowel in either language corresponds exactly with any in the other.

§ 4. The learner of a new language must therefore realize that he is dealing with quite new sounds; he must not be satisfied to continue to use any of the sounds of his own language unless he is certain in each case that his own sound is exactly the same as that in the new language, and he must not rest content until he has completely mastered all the new sounds. If he is a Spaniard learning English, it will not do for him to go on using his own five vowels, because English has many more, and unless he learns them

all, the words he pronounces will not sound correct and an Englishman may not understand what he says. Similarly, an African learning English must be prepared to learn a large number of new sounds, and he will find that many of his own sounds are not used at all by Englishmen.

§ 5. Many people, when they begin the study of a new language, are discouraged by the number of strange sounds they have to learn. They sometimes ask: Is it really necessary to learn them all perfectly? Surely, they will say, even if my sounds are not accurate, I shall still be understood. The answer is that they may be understood, but not so readily. In the pronunciation of many Africans no distinction is made between *leave* and *live*, between *bird* and *bed* and between *hat* and *heart*; and surely, when you say "He lost his heart" you do not want it to sound like "He lost his hat". Moreover, even if you do manage to make yourself understood, you will not express yourself well; you will not do yourself justice unless your pronunciation is good. The ideal to be aimed at, in learning English, is such a degree of perfection that an Englishman who does not know you, and who is listening behind a curtain while you speak, cannot tell that English is not your mother tongue.

§ 6. But can one really learn to speak like an Englishman? Can one learn an entirely new set of sounds perfectly? They seem so unnatural and come so awkwardly on the tongue, you will probably say. Yes, no doubt they do at first; but if you persevere, you can learn to speak English with a very good accent, and if you concentrate enough, you can make your pronunciation perfect. The bodily organs that we use when we speak, the lips and the tongue and the vocal cords and so on, do not differ very much from one group of people to another. Africans very often have somewhat thicker lips than Europeans; but that need not

affect their pronunciation, as has been proved in numerous cases of negroes who grow up in English-speaking surroundings and acquire English as their mother tongue. But if one has already got an African language as one's mother tongue, can one then learn a perfect English pronunciation as well? Yes, undoubtedly. There are many examples of people who have come to master another language in addition to their mother tongue. The best way to learn the pronunciation of another language is by the *phonetic* method, that is, by a systematic study of the sounds of the language and the way in which they are produced. *Phonetics* is the name we give to the branch of knowledge that is concerned with speech sounds. This book deals with the phonetics of English; it will explain how English speech sounds are formed and how you should set about learning to say them correctly.

§ 7. It should be realized from the outset that learning a new set of sounds means forming a number of new habits. You will have to put your speech organs into positions which are not used in speaking your own language. You will find it difficult at first because your muscles are not used to those particular movements. To begin with, you will have to think consciously of the position of your tongue and the shape of your lips, and so on, for each sound that you want to make. You will find it a slow and laborious process and may wonder: How on earth am I ever going to become fluent in my speech if I have to think for about five minutes before pronouncing each sound? The answer is—by constant practice. If you have gone through the experience of learning to ride a bicycle, you will remember how at first you clung awkwardly to the handlebars and had to concentrate almost feverishly and strain every nerve; and yet the result was rather disappointing, for your movements were clumsy and you looked and felt most

insecure in the saddle. But in a fairly short time new habits were formed, and your muscles performed their new functions without your brain having to interfere. You can now ride on your bicycle and think about anything you like; cycling no longer requires concentration. In the same way, if you practise sufficiently, your muscles will form new speech habits and you will be able to make the correct sounds without consciously thinking of them.

§ 8. The secret of all language-learning is imitation. The learner should strive to imitate the native speakers of the language, that is, those who have the language as their mother tongue. Indeed, the mother tongue itself is learnt by imitation. No baby is born with an aptitude for any particular language. If a child is taken from his parents and brought up in a country where a different language is spoken, that language will become his mother tongue. So a child's mother tongue is not necessarily that which his mother speaks; he does not *inherit* his language, but *learns* it from his surroundings when he is small. His first efforts to speak are probably not very successful, and his sounds may be very wide of the mark; but gradually he will learn to control his muscles and so produce the right sounds without effort.

§ 9. From this brief consideration of how a child learns to speak several useful points emerge. Firstly, since imitation plays such an important part, it is essential that the learner should have the opportunity of hearing the language spoken correctly. The teacher must be able to make the correct sounds; if possible, he should be a native speaker of the language. Secondly, the student must listen carefully to the sounds of the new language, because unless he can hear the sounds accurately and tell them apart, he cannot hope to reproduce them correctly. For instance, if the learner cannot hear the difference between the English

vowels in *short* and *shot*, it is obviously useless for him to try to make the distinction in his own speech. So he must train his ear to hear the new sounds. Thirdly, constant practice is needed to learn the right position and shape of the speech organs, the right movements of the tongue and jaw, and so on, and, most important of all, to fix all these things in one's speech habits so that they become second nature.

§ 10. One further point should be noted. To assist the student in acquiring the new sounds it is important that the teacher should be able not only to make the sounds correctly, but to analyse and describe the method by which he makes them. The small child has no such teacher by his side; but then the child can devote all his time for about three years to the business of learning to speak. As we get older, so many other things claim our attention that we cannot devote all our time to any one of them. Moreover, once we have acquired our first set of sounds and speech habits, namely those of our mother tongue, it requires a more deliberate and determined effort to learn a fresh set. This, then, is where phonetics can help you.

§ 11. Phonetics, to people who know very little about it, usually means a lot of funny characters which make ordinary English words look most strange and barbarous. Although this is not a correct description of phonetics, it is true that in writing about speech sounds we often find it useful to refer to them by means of a *phonetic alphabet*. No student of English can fail to notice that English spelling is not always a reliable guide to pronunciation. If we compare the words *cough*, *enough*, *bough*, *though*, *through*, and *ought*, we see that the same spelling *ough* is used to represent widely varying sounds; on the other hand, in the words *seed*, *beam*, *field*, *key*, and *these*, we see different spellings all representing the same sound. It would be very awkward,

indeed, if throughout this book we had to keep referring, for instance, to the sound of *ee* in *seed* and the sound of *oo* in *boot*. Instead, we use a special alphabet in which each letter or symbol stands for one and only one sound wherever it occurs. A word written in phonetic characters can be read aloud correctly by anyone familiar with phonetics and phonetic transcription.

§ 12. But although in talking about pronunciation we generally use phonetic characters, phonetics as such is not the same thing as the use of these characters. However diligently you study phonetic transcription and learn that *though* is written [ðou] and *enough* is [i'nʌf], and so on, unless you can say the sounds that these characters stand for, you will have gained nothing by your study.

§ 13. The fundamental principle in phonetic transcription is, then, that each sign should always stand for one particular sound and that each sound should always be represented by the same sign (see, however, Appendix B). Now certain details of pronunciation can sometimes be simplified or omitted in phonetic transcription, and so in practice we have several different types of transcription, depending on how many details it is considered necessary to include. Some books on phonetics follow one system and some another, but the systems do not vary greatly and it is fairly easy to go from one to another. In this book we shall use the system known as *broad* transcription, and a list of the characters used in this system, with brief explanations of what they mean, is given on p. viii. The phonetic characters will be further explained as we deal with the various sounds in turn in the following chapters. Notice, by the way, that phonetic signs are generally put between square brackets to distinguish them from ordinary letters. In Appendix C we shall explain the differences between our system and the other types of transcription, so that after

you have finished this book you can, if you wish, consult other books on the subject.

§ 14. When you listen carefully to the sounds that people make when they speak, you will notice that different speakers of the same language do not always speak alike. The chief cause of these differences is geographical dispersion; many languages are spoken over a wide area, and people from different parts of the area speak somewhat differently. Very often it is possible by the way a person speaks to tell where he comes from. For instance, a Yoruba from Ilorin does not speak exactly like one from Lagos, although, to be sure, they both speak Yoruba. Similar differences can be heard among speakers of Ewe and Kikuyu and probably most other languages in the world. The various local types of a language are known as *dialects*.

§ 15. You will sometimes, in a dialect, hear strange words and forms which are not used outside that particular dialect. In this book we are concerned only with pronunciation and not with vocabulary and grammar; but even if two people use exactly the same words and put them together in the same way, there may still be a difference in those two people's speech, namely in their pronunciation—or accent, as it is sometimes called. In the following pages, when we talk of dialects we mean dialect *accents*.

§ 16. English has a number of dialect accents. In the different parts of the English-speaking world, in England, Scotland, America, Australia, and so on, variations are noticeable; and even within such a relatively small area as England there are many local accents.

§ 17. The existence of dialects raises a problem for the student wishing to learn English. What form of spoken English should he imitate, because he obviously cannot imitate them all? Should he try to speak like a Scot or like an Irishman, like an Englishman from Yorkshire or

like one from Devon? No type of English can be said to be intrinsically better than any other; nor can any type of English be termed Standard English, if by that term we mean a form of English which has received the official approval of some authoritative body. No such authoritative body exists; everyone is free to speak as he likes, but in practice we find that a certain kind of English is more widely accepted as a model than any other. This is the type of English known as *Received Pronunciation* or, as phoneticians often call it, "R.P.".

§ 18. Received Pronunciation is the type of English most often heard among educated people in southern England. It is used by the majority of Londoners who have had a university education, and it is commonly heard in Oxford and Cambridge. Very much the same pronunciation is used by many people outside the south of England; educated speech in the whole of Britain approximates to "R.P." Moreover, "R.P." is the pronunciation used by the announcers employed by the British Broadcasting Corporation. In fact, "R.P." is not, in practice, confined to any small area of the English-speaking world; it is not a local dialect like Somerset or Lancashire English. Although not a standard in the official sense, it is chosen in many places as the model to be followed. Most books on English pronunciation, for instance, are based on "R.P.". In this book, also, when we talk of the correct pronunciation of a certain vowel or consonant, etc., we mean the way this sound is pronounced by "R.P." speakers. It is important for you to realize, however, that not all English people use "R.P.", and many people from other parts of the English-speaking world have a somewhat different pronunciation. From time to time in the course of this book we shall mention some of these local variations.

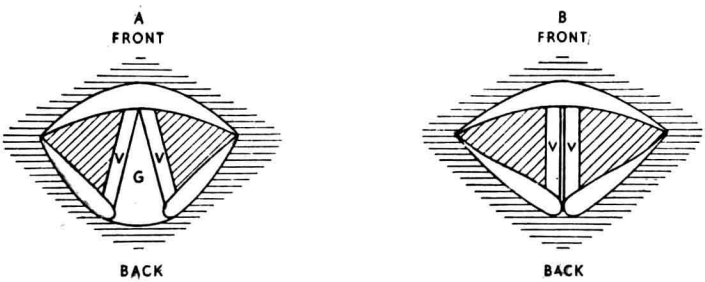
Chapter II

THE ORGANS OF SPEECH

§ 19. How are speech sounds made? We use our tongue and lips, of course, but what is it that gives rise to the actual sound? Because however much we may change the position and shape of our tongue and lips, and so on, that is not in itself sufficient to produce any audible sound. It would be as if we were to twiddle our thumbs or wave our arms in the air, thereby hoping to make a sound so loud that it could be heard distinctly by other people and used for communicating with them. Clearly something else is needed. What happens in most cases when we speak is that a stream of air is breathed out from the lungs, and this stream of air, when passing through the narrow spaces in the human throat and mouth, makes a sound in the same way as a strong wind blowing through a house will produce a rushing or howling noise. Now the noise of the wind is not always the same: the wind sounds different when blowing through a narrow crack and when blowing through a wider opening. In the same way, by modifying the shape of the passage through which the air passes when we speak, we can make a number of different sounds, in fact a surprising number. We can produce a new and distinct sound merely by varying the passage slightly at one particular point, for instance at the teeth or at the lips, and there are a number of such points at which the course of the air stream may be varied. Together, the organs situated at these points constitute the *speech organs*, and we shall describe them all in detail in the following pages.

§ 20. The *lungs* are like two bags which can be enlarged and compressed by the muscles of the chest. This happens regularly when we breathe, and as a result the air is drawn in and forced out through the tube known as the *windpipe*. It is this stream of air that is utilized when we speak. Normally it is only the outgoing stream that is used, and consequently we have at times to stop and catch our breath; this we do in the natural intervals in our speech where the meaning allows a pause. All speech, therefore, is divided into *breath-groups*, that is, groups of words said together without any pause or, as we often put it, said "in the same breath".

§ 21. The first point where it is possible to modify the air stream is at the top of the windpipe, which ends in a bony structure called the *larynx*. The front part of the larynx protrudes and is popularly known as the "Adam's apple". Inside the larynx are the so-called *vocal cords*; but these are not, in spite of their name, cords or strings such as one sees on a violin or a piano. They are rather like small lips projecting from the sides of the larynx and connected with muscles so that they can be brought close together

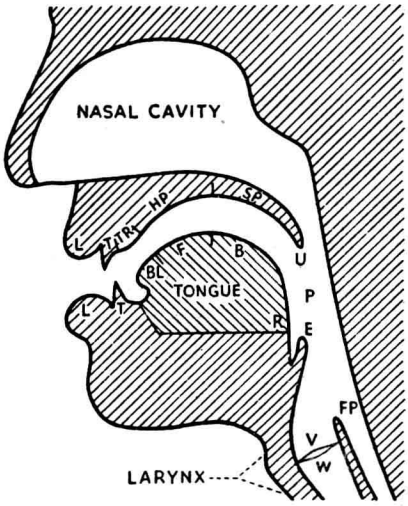


G Glottis
V Vocal cords

Fig. 1. The larynx and the vocal cords

and placed edge to edge in the middle of the air passage, or be drawn apart leaving a wide opening between them. This opening is termed the *glottis*.

§ 22. Fig. 1 shows drawings of the vocal cords as they would appear from above if one could see them (which in fact one can, but only by means of special apparatus) in the two positions mentioned, A open and B closed. In Fig. 2 one can see the position of the vocal cords (V) in relation to the other organs of speech.



B	Back of the tongue
BL	Blade of the tongue
E	Epiglottis
F	Front of the tongue
FP	Food passage
HP	Hard palate
L	Lips
P	Pharynx
R	Root of the tongue
SP	Soft palate
T	Teeth
TR	Teeth ridge
U	Uvula
V	Vocal cords
W	Windpipe

Fig. 2. The organs of speech

§ 23. When the vocal cords are drawn apart, the air from the lungs can pass freely through the open glottis. This is the position we use when we breathe normally without speaking. The passing of the air through the open glottis produces a faint sound, which becomes audible to other people if we breathe through the mouth instead of through