

Peter Roach – The Early Years TRANSCRIPT

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Peter Roach tells how psychology, English language teaching and his grandchildren have fuelled his interest in phonetics and phonology. He goes on to talk about his own experiences of learning to pronounce a foreign language.

AL This is Anna Linthe from Cambridge University Press and I’m here talking to Peter Roach. Peter is Emeritus Professor of Phonetics at Reading University, principle editor of the *Cambridge English Pronouncing Dictionary*, and Cambridge has just published the fourth edition of his highly popular course *English Phonetics and Phonology*. Peter – welcome and thanks for taking the time to talk to us today.

PR Thank you.

AL Firstly, I wanted to ask you about your background and how you got into phonetics and phonology. Your academic career began in psychology – what inspired the switch to phonetics and phonology?

PR Well, it’s easy looking back to try and see a sort of thread going through everything as though I’d always known what I wanted to do. It wasn’t quite like that. I did start on Classics before I got on to psychology. I did Classics at school, so I’d got Latin and Ancient Greek under my belt before I started on that. I did psychology with philosophy and the general atmosphere in the mid-sixties was that language was right at the centre of all this. The Oxford experimental psychology department had a brilliant psycholinguistics unit which later went to Edinburgh, and so I had some of the most famous psycholinguists as tutors. And that enthused me a lot about the study of speech and language in relation to psychology. And philosophy in Oxford at that time was mostly concerned with looking for ways of answering deep philosophical questions by looking at how

we actually use language in a real world, so that the sort of things that Austin was doing about performatives and things like that were very much what were being lectured on and studied. So I had a lot of background in language in various ways. But in fact before I went to university I had a spell actually teaching English to foreigners. By an extraordinarily lucky chance I ended up with six months teaching English in the French navy, and they made me an officer and I was on a beautiful island in the Mediterranean, and mostly concentrating on pronunciation. So that gave me lots of background and interest in language and pronunciation. And then, when my wife and I graduated, we decided we wanted to see the world, and since language was very much of interest to both of us, we thought we'd become English language teachers and go and train to do that. And we went to Manchester University and the course included phonetic training by Alan Cruttenden, and I just fell in love with phonetics. and the rest followed from that. But the psychology always stayed there as a major secondary interest.

AL So which part of phonetics and phonology interests you the most? Is it the psychological aspect of it?

PR I think it is. I think I'm particularly interested in how the brain is piecing together the information of this unfamiliar language that's being learned and that's fascinating whether you look at children acquiring language, or whether you look at foreign learners acquiring language. You can try to make intelligent guesses about what it is that's getting through and what is failing to get through and the reasons for this. So, for example, I'm having the fun of observing my grandchildren learning to speak and seeing all the usual things that suggest perhaps that young children are hearing through a loud background noise. If you say 'this is a banana', they will pick up 'nana' – they'll miss the first syllable, almost as though the volume wasn't turned up high enough for them to hear it. If you say 'it's a spoon', they don't hear the 's' on the beginning and they say it's a 'boon'. Things like that. If you know a certain amount about the psychology of perception and a certain amount about the acoustics of speech, you can come up with some quite interesting thoughts about what's going on. Similarly with

foreign learners – they are filtering all this information through their first or second language phonology and that's a kind of distortion system. It's actually making some sort of change to the signal that native speakers of English don't have. And again, if you're interested in that sort of thing, it's rewarding to speculate on what it is that the filter of the native language is doing to cause the person to have problems. And why some things are dead easy to learn and some things are really difficult to learn.

AL When you've been learning a foreign language, what have you found most difficult in terms of pronunciation?

PR I suppose it's the rhythmical features above all else. I spend most of my language-learning time now trying to improve my French. It is extremely difficult for an English speaker to get a reasonably good rhythm of French – it's so radically different. And Spanish is another of my languages and it's pretty much the same there. The temptation to reduce down to weak syllables, to put schwas in where there shouldn't be, is overpowering really, and you really have to make yourself give the right value to all the syllables. I think that's my main area of concentration.