Phonetics and Phonology – Past, Present and Future
TRANSCRIPT

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Peter Roach discusses changes in phonetics and phonology and how these changes have affected language teaching. He goes on to suggest how new technology might impact on research and pronunciation teaching in the future.

AL   This is Anna Linthe from Cambridge University Press, and I'm here talking to Peter Roach. Thinking about the field of phonetics and phonology and how it's developed, the first edition of English Phonetics and Phonology was published in 1983. What's changed in the field since then?

PL   I think we ought to separate phonetics and phonology, although we usually lump them together. Phonetics changes very slowly – somebody from a hundred years ago would recognise most of what we're teaching in phonetics nowadays. Phonology on the other hand changes extremely rapidly, there are always new fashions and new theories. And since the book first came out we've been through an enormous number of different theoretical approaches, many of which I can't understand to be honest! I think that the most important change since the first appearance of the book is that, at the time I wrote it, there was very little around to tell people how to set about teaching pronunciation. And there was a feeling I think that as long as you were taught enough phonetics and phonology, you could then go into a classroom and start teaching pronunciation. And it was pretty much the same with linguistics and applied linguistics, there was a feeling that you could do a Master's course in linguistics and that qualified you to go into a language teaching classroom and start teaching English to foreigners. And we've got a lot wiser since then. A lot of people have put a lot of thought into how we can most effectively make use of this knowledge in the classroom. I don't have space to talk about that in the book – I wish I had, but certainly there are now many books that are well worth reading, that explain the

kind of approaches and the kind of problems that should concern teachers who are doing pronunciation work.

AL   And how do you think the field will develop in the future?

PR   Well, I think one thing is certain, and that is that there will be more and more material available that we can call authentic. I think that it becomes easier nowadays to get hold of material from real-life conversations, real-life interactions between speakers, and we have the means to edit those and study them in great detail. I worry about this a bit because I think, in some cases, learners might get thrown in at the deep end, and start looking at authentic materials when they haven't really been given the basic background tools for studying speech. I'm thinking about ways of talking about vowels and consonants and stress and syllables and so on that do need to be learned before you get into it. But I'm sure that more and more, we're going to want to get away from rather sterile, simple exercises with just the voice of somebody like me, and get into the wonderful variety which you get with different speakers, different ages, different styles and so on.

AL   And what impact has new technology had on research into phonetics and phonology, and what impact has it had on students of phonetics and phonology?

PR   Well, a lot of new technology has certainly evolved since 1983, and the most important thing of course is now, everybody has a computer – or nearly everybody, and there is some wonderful software available for doing really microscopic study of aspects of speech. That's really good news, and the fact that this software is normally available free of charge is just astonishing. I wish more use was made of this, and I think that somebody ought to come up with a way that links basic acoustic phonetics and computer analysis of speech with the business of learning how to pronounce a language. And I think that's something we will see in the future. Something in the technology which to my amazement

really has not had any impact at all is automatic speech recognition, and speech synthesis. A lot of my research career was spent trying to work on ways in which automatic speech recognition might work better and work on more varieties of language, more – different dialects and so on, and on trying to use synthetic speech. And I think a lot of us believed that once the technology was really fully evolved, everybody would jump onto it and make use of it. And nobody wants to work with it, it's very disappointing! There's now very good speech recognition software more or less given away free with computers. You could think of all kinds of language teaching applications that we used to dream of in the 1980s and 90s, and nobody's doing anything with it as far as I can see.