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REVIEWS

PETER ROACH, *Phonetics*, Oxford Introductions to Language Study, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. Pp. x + 116; ISBN 0 19 437239 1.

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In line with other titles in the *Oxford Introductions to Language Study* series, this book consists of four sections: a Survey, providing a broad overview of the subject; some Readings, offering a selection of additional short texts extracted from leading authorities in the field and designed to augment the topics covered in the Survey; an annotated list of References; and a Glossary.

This is a very small book, not just in terms of the number of pages, but also the page size, which is the same as for an ordinary paperback novel and only about two thirds that of most textbooks. Many students will find this small size attractive, as it would allow the book to fit easily into a coat pocket, but the question remains how much sense it is possible to make of as complex an area as phonetics in such a small space. The Survey section, which occupies the bulk of the book, attempts to cover articulation, vowels and consonants, tones in tone languages, rhythm and intonation, acoustics, phonemes and allophones, coarticulation and regional variation, and, inevitably, the information is pared to the minimum. Nevertheless, it is obvious that every word has been chosen with great care, with the result that the text is always clear, even if it is rather terse.

It may be useful to compare the description of one item, the articulation of a glottal stop, with that found in another introductory phonetics textbook. The full explanation (pp. 13–14) states that ‘if we close the vocal folds firmly, we prevent air from escaping. This is often called a **glottal stop**’. And the glossary entry (p. 110) is equally brief, stating that a glottal stop is a plosive consonant with glottal place of articulation. One wonders whether a student new to the subject could understand this. In comparison, Ladefoged (2001: 48) devotes two whole paragraphs to introducing a glottal stop, starting with a cough and then progressing to sequences such as [ɑʔɑ] and [iʔi] before considering utterances meaning ‘no’ such as [ʌʔʌ] and [ʔmʔm]. Obviously, the novice reader would have a much better chance of comprehending this fuller explanation. At the same time, however, one must admit that the best way to introduce a glottal stop is for someone to demonstrate it, and any amount of written advice can never compete with a simple demonstration. So maybe the very brief explanation in this volume is in fact quite adequate if it is accompanied by appropriate exemplification by a teacher.

This suggests a very important role for this book: as a foundation textbook for a class on phonetics, it would be excellent. Students would have an exceptionally concise summary of the important issues in a broad survey of phonetics, but all the embellishments and illustrations that bring the subject truly alive could be provided by the teacher. We are told the story (p. 27) of a missionary to West Africa who, when he discovered how difficult it was to learn tone languages, decided he must have made a mistake in hearing the word of the Lord, but such endearing tales are rather rare in this book. In most cases, such as the description of all the possible places of articulation (pp. 21–22), the text is hardly more than a list, with all the fascinating, quirky details omitted. However, this would not be a problem if the teacher were to add these details, for example, to explain the difficulties children have in producing an [s] when they lose their front teeth, or maybe to demonstrate the different possibilities of producing interdental fricatives, thereby providing supplementary elaboration while students would still have a basic, clear, concise text to fall back on.

It seems that this kind of central role for a tutor was envisaged in the writing of the book, as some of the questions that follow the passages in the Readings section are clearly designed more as tutorial topics to stimulate discussions than as problems that students could realistically answer without some guidance. For example, it is unlikely that novice readers could really work out how to use broad phonemic and narrow allophonic transcription to capture the pitch variation found in Pike's tonemes (p. 80), or that they would be able to devise a way to test whether a language was stress-timed or syllable-timed (p. 87), or that they could formulate clear differences between 'assimilation' and 'coarticulation' (p. 95). But these questions could certainly provide excellent starting points for fascinating tutorial discussions.

Quite often, the text raises further questions which are not quite fully answered. For example, we are told (p. 11) that speech has evolved by using parts of the body designed for some other purpose, as our lungs, tongues, vocal folds and ears all have primary functions apart from speech. Now, it is fairly obvious what function our lungs, tongues and ears have in addition to dealing with speech. But what about vocal folds? Many novice readers might be left mystified here, and would benefit from a pointer to a work such as Aitchison (1997) in order to find out that the primary function of the vocal folds is to close off the lungs while we are eating and to enable us to lift heavy objects, and it is unfortunate that space has not allowed references to works such as this, outside the realm of phonetics. Similarly, although the chapter on acoustics is amply illustrated with spectrograms, it is a pity that space has not allowed the chapter on intonation to include any computer-based pitch plots, so that we could see how the idealised plots of intonation get mapped into fundamental frequency contours in reality.

In conclusion, this book will probably find a very valuable niche as a clear but highly compact foundation textbook for an introductory course in phonetics. It is possible that it will also prove successful for its other stated purpose (p. viii), for non-students who want a succinct introduction to the subject. For some of these latter readers, it may serve as an exceptionally efficient and admirably concise survey of phonetics, though it seems likely that some of these potential readers will find it rather too compact and would prefer something a little more substantial.

References

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The phonology of Standard Chinese, or 'Mandarin phonology', as it is sometimes referred to, is a field in which consensus has been exceedingly hard to come by. Experts are divided on such basic issues as the number of vowel heights, the phonemic membership of consonantal series, the constituent structure of the syllable and the exact nature of diminutive suffixation.