

## Phonetic Training as a Prerequisite for Researchers in Speech-Sounds

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In the study of the sounds of language, it should always be kept in mind that they are pronounced and heard by man mainly for the purpose of communication.

The sounds of language are the means for communication, and have a structure which serves this purpose. What we are concerned with in phonetic and phonological studies is this structure.

In our daily acts of communication, we correctly produce and hear the sounds which have such a structure without any effort owing to the social habits which we acquired in the course of learning our mother tongue. This is the case, however, only when we pronounce and hear the utterances of our mother tongue. In the case of foreign languages, the situation is extremely different. When we hear the sounds of a foreign language for the first time, they sound for us quite inarticulate, and even as if they were mere noises. At the same time, they are so foreign to us that it is almost impossible to imitate them. This is because the phonetic structure of a foreign language is very different from that of one's native tongue, and because man's social habit of producing and hearing sounds of language is formed and established only for his own mother tongue.

However, social habit is nothing but a kind of habit, and can be modified to various degrees by training and exercise. This is the reason why we become able to pronounce and hear correctly to various degrees the sounds of foreign languages by means of phonetic training, i.e. drills in hearing and pronunciation.

Not all specialists in the study of sounds of language, however, seem to comprehend this matter. Some people think that one can hear correctly, without any phonetic training, the sounds of foreign languages if he only listens very carefully to them, and some specialists with ears half-trained phonetically are often so confident as to claim that a difference in the sounds of a foreign language does not exist because he does not hear it. On the other hand, some people are convinced that nobody except for a few geniuses can correctly imitate or hear the sounds of foreign languages.

As mentioned above, however, the sounds of language are what man utters and hears as the signs of communication, and consequently they have structures which are distinctively different from each other. Therefore, one should have the inborn ability to pronounce and hear correctly the sounds of foreign languages, in so far as human psychological and physiological capacity for producing and hearing sounds is not very different from nation to nation. And this is, I believe, a fundamental assumption of phonetics, which seems to work well so far as I know.

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However, our ears are trained since childhood in such a way that they are very sharp in hearing the phonemic differences of our mother tongue but rather dull in hearing those phonetic differences which are phonemically irrelevant. This does not necessarily mean, however, that our ears are physiologically incapable of hearing the latter differences. In many cases, they can hear them but are trained and accustomed to ignore them. Phonetic training awakens our attention to the phonetic features in question, and our ears begin to hear the differences. Phonetic training cannot change the inborn physiological capacity of our ears, but can make us aware of those phonetic features which we are accustomed to ignore.

We cannot hear some of the phonemic differences of foreign languages, because they are sub-phonemic for our mother tongue and we are accustomed to ignore them. The phonemic differences of a language, however, are something distinct and easy to hear for the native speakers so as to serve the purpose of communication, and consequently should be audible also for foreigners. As usually is the case, phonetically trained ears can easily hear *at least* the phonemic differences of foreign languages.

In the same way, our organs of speech are trained since childhood in such a way that they very easily and correctly produce the sounds of our native language but only those. It seems almost impossible for us to pronounce foreign sounds. However, this does not necessarily mean that our organs of speech are physiologically incapable of producing foreign sounds. If trained, they can make the necessary movements, probably because the physiological capacity of the organs of speech is not very different from nation to nation. As a matter of fact, phonetically trained persons can usually pronounce foreign sounds correctly. Phonetic training cannot change the inborn physiological capacity of our organs of speech, but can change the latent capacity into an active one.

It is a mistake to think that we can correctly hear foreign sounds without phonetic training, while it is also a mistake to think that it is physiologically impossible to pronounce and hear the sounds of foreign languages correctly. Therefore, researchers in the sounds of language should not give up the hope of becoming thoroughly trained phonetically, which does not demand any special genius. On the contrary, they should voluntarily undergo phonetic drills in hearing and pronunciation, which are, I believe, the minimum requirement for any specialist in the study of the sounds of language.