

## THE CHOICE OF TRANSCRIPTION IN FOREIGN-LANGUAGE TEACHING

NILS ERIK ENKVIST

1. I shall start with two general observations, one on the character of linguistic description, the other on the nature of phonetic transcription.

It was in protest against the excessive application of the grammatical categories of Latin and of the old type of universal, rational grammar that structuralists set up one of their basic principles: that each language must be described purely in terms of its own categories. However, this principle also proved to bring with it a new comparative, and even universal, approach to language. Structuralists soon became interested in setting up systems of linguistic description applicable to any and all languages, and such systems can in a sense be regarded as universal grammars of a new type. Practical work with several kinds of problems, such as linguistic typology, the influence of one language upon another, translation, etc., also favours methods by which different languages can be analysed in terms sufficiently similar and consistent to allow comparison. In foreign-language teaching, such comparisons between the structures of the source and target languages are becoming part of the standard procedure.

The nature of so-called phonetic transcription has only become clear with the development of phonemic theory. Between the two extremes of "accurate" description using a very "narrow" type of phonetic alphabet, and a phonemic transcription which sets down the sound system of a language with maximum economy, many different compromises are possible. In fact the "phonetic" transcriptions based on various adaptations of the IPA and used in textbooks of the major European languages can all be said to represent such compromises. A host of instances could be cited as examples of the tacit application of phonemic principles in so-called phonetic transcription. Thus in the transcription of English used e.g. in Daniel Jones's *Pronouncing Dictionary*, and hence in most Scandinavian textbooks, the "dark" [ɪ] and the "clear" [i] types and their various allophonic variations are transcribed with the same symbol, because a simple description of their complementary allophonic distribution suffices to indicate which of them is to be used.

2. In the teaching of English RP to Finns, one of the major problems is the satisfactory rendering of the RP vowels.

Finnish has eight vowel phonemes: /y ö ä i e a o u/, all of which occur both short and

long in minimal contrast in various stress positions ('*takka*/'*taakka*/'*takkaa*/'*taakkaa*, etc.). Finnish is thus a quantity language in that length is phonemically significant without major concomitant differences in vowel quality or in stress or pitch conditions. It is theoretically possible to analyse Finnish long sounds phonemically in two different ways either as a combination of two short sounds or as a combination of phoneme and chroneme; the choice will of course depend on the phonetic definitions and phonemic and distributional postulates adopted. The distribution of Finnish vowels is further limited by vowel harmony. Within each native Finnish word, vowels are limited either to the set /y ö ä i e/ or to the set /i e a o u/, and bound morphemes such as case endings that contain the non-neutral /y ö ä/ or /a o u/ have two allomorphs to fit the harmony pattern (*talossa* / *metsässä*). Unharmonized vowel patterns occur in many loanwords, but they can be readily explained in terms of two coexistent phonemic systems, one for more native and another for more alien words. The eighteen Finnish diphthongs can be regarded as combinations of vowel phonemes.

The linguistic bias of a Finn thus enables him to recognize and to produce eight vowels, all of which occur both short and long. Vowel harmony further decreases the number of possible vowel combinations within a word and thus increases vowel predictability.

In analyses of RP English, the number of vowel phonemes will depend on the postulates adopted. The distinction between vowels and diphthongs is also arbitrary, as – even apart from transitional formant shifts – many of the "vowel" phonemes are often audibly manifested as glides. The inventory of vowels that are transcribed with single vowel symbols in one typical Finnish textbook goes as follows: /i:/ as in *beat*, /i/ as in *bit*, /e/ as in *bet*, /æ/ as in *bat*, /a:/ as in *part*, /ɔ/ as in *pot*, /ɔ:/ as in *port*, /o/ as in *obey*, /u/ as in *put*, /u:/ as in *boot*, /ʌ/ as in *but*, /ɜ:/ as in *bird*, and /ɜ/ to symbolize the initial vowel in *above*. If diphthongal elements are counted among the vowels, we must add /a/ as in *die* and /ɛ/ as in *bear*. It has been convincingly demonstrated that in an Englishman's systemic identification of these 13 or 15 vowel phonemes (21 or 22 including the diphthongs), quality distinctions are generally primary and length distinctions secondary.<sup>1</sup> It might be added that ever since Anglo-Saxon times, there has been in English a tendency to centralize the vowels of unstressed syllables. Such a trend does not exist in Finnish.

When a Finn learns English, then, one of his first tasks will be to learn to recognize and to reproduce a larger number of qualitatively different vowels than he is used to, and at the same time to get rid of his native chronemic bias. As experience bears out, to achieve this is indeed one of the important tasks of every English teacher in Finland. As Mr. Kalevi Wiik's recent experiments have shown, before Finnish elementary-school children are taught English, they almost without exception assign the English [i] as in *pit* to an /e/.<sup>2</sup> This is exactly what one would expect on the

<sup>1</sup> See e.g. A. C. Gimson, "Implications of the Phonemic/Chronemic Grouping of English Vowels," *Acta Linguistica*, V (1945-49), 94-100.

<sup>2</sup> "Suomen ja englannin vokaalien eroista," *Suomen uusien kielten opettajien liiton vuosikirja*, II (1961), 7-15.

basis of the qualities of these two vowels. But though substitution of Finnish [e] for RP [i] would be a phonetically plausible transfer, in fact schoolchildren and university students will substitute Finnish short [i] for the considerably lower and more retracted English [i]. They will usually also substitute a chronemic contrast [pi:t/pit] for what in RP should primarily be a contrast in vowel quality [pit/ptɪ]. One of the reasons for this is no doubt the stimulus of English spelling and transcription. Another reason is systemic. For RP [i/ɪ/e], Finns use, not [i/e/e], which would obliterate the contrast [ɪ/e], but [i:/i/e], possibly with other compensatory clues such as syllabic vowel-consonant length patterns. Many students and even teachers are unaware of the ensuing phonetic distortion. The standards of English teaching are by now sufficiently high to draw attention to such phonetic features: we need no longer be satisfied with the mere substitution of one Finnish phoneme for each RP one.

One of the reasons why insufficient attention is being paid to English vowel qualities is the variant of the IPA used in practically all Finnish textbooks of English. This is the "broad" transcription that uses two dots [:] as marks of quality as well as of length. As Finns are experts at handling length and poor at reproducing finer distinctions in vowel quality, a transcription of this kind very efficiently masks the core of the problem. It is of course theoretically correct to use any symbol to indicate any sound as long as the symbol-to-sound relationship is accurately defined and constant. But to teachers and students who generally identify the two dots as a length-mark the present transcription is at best complicated and at worst misleading.

In Finland, this type of transcription has deep roots, and, understandably enough, textbook-writers are reluctant to adopt another. It is also desirable that one and the same transcription be used in all schools and all textbooks, and the present system has the further support of international tradition, including Jones's *Pronouncing Dictionary*. All the same the use of a transcription that does not confuse the important issue of quality *versus* length, for instance that adopted by Armstrong and Ward for *A Handbook of English Intonation*, would most likely lead to a better appreciation of the differences between the Finnish and RP vowel systems.

3. I have dwelt so long on one limited, though topical, instance because it seems to bring with it some wider implications. Today many linguists are in the fortunate position of being able to start new educational traditions. Some of them may be faced with the problem of choosing between various approaches to the teaching of pronunciation of a foreign language, including the necessary choice between various systems of phonetic (or near-phonemic) transcription. Of course local conditions, the teaching situation and a host of other extralinguistic factors will limit the choice of practical procedures. All the same, one should not blindly seize upon one or another system of transcription simply because it happens to be there. One should rather start by selecting, or working out, the transcription that best helps one to realize the particular aims of one's teaching. Even the IPA is capable of sufficient

variation to make it adaptable to a number of bilingual situations without masking or confusing the particular problems involved in each situation. The ideal, then, in the choice of transcription seems to be the optimal compromise between local needs and international traditions.

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