INTERVIEW WITH DR GEOFF LINDSEY

April 11th, 2014

We met Dr Geoff Lindsey at the University of Verona, where he was invited by the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures to teach two short refresher courses on contemporary English pronunciation. Lindsey, who has a degree from University College London and a PhD from UCLA (Los Angeles, California), is an expert in phonetics and a renowned pronunciation coach. Dr Lindsey’s experience as an academic is considerable. Besides having taught at London, Edinburgh and Cambridge Universities, he has done and published research on American and British dialects. He has also worked as a screenwriter and director for a number of projects. In addition, he acted as a contributor to the 1989 Kiel revision of the International Phonetic Alphabet. Today, Dr Geoff Lindsey is a prominent pronunciation and accent reduction coach and works with a variety of students with different needs and aims, as well as with actors, interpreters, and professionals of all kinds and of all languages.

Valeria Franceschi: Why did you develop a specific interest in phonetics?

Geoff Lindsey: I don’t remember developing a specific interest, I think it was always there. I think it’s a little bit like music; some people just seem to have this predisposition for music. I can’t remember a time when I was not interested in accents. One of my earliest memories is sitting on the backseat of the car with my parents in the front, thinking about vowels and consonants. I think I have something of a knack, which didn’t come from work, it’s just something I had. One of my teachers said he got into phonetics because he thought it was easy, and I think it’s the same for me. For some people, some of those skills of listening and speaking are just not very challenging. We’re drawn towards things that we find relatively easy. I’m not trying to say that it’s a simple subject and everything in it is easy, but some of the practical aspects seem to come quite naturally.

VF: When you teach non-native students, what do you focus the most on, especially if there’s limited time?

GL: That’s a good question. It depends on the first language of the non-natives. If people are trying to teach non-natives – if you’re talking about teaching the pronunciation of English – it’s a journey towards English and you’re coming from different starting points. Your starting point could be Italian, or it could be Japanese, so it’s not the same, and you have to work on different sorts of things. But I try to prioritize different features of pronunciation so as to give most emphasis to the ones that affect intelligibility the most. Differences like, say, differences between British and American speech are relatively low-priority for somebody who’s a non-native. But if you’re teaching an actor, say a native-speaking actor who wants to have a different accent, you have to focus on fine details. So, I try to prioritize. I think about the things that affect intelligibility where the mother tongue of the student gets in the way.

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2 Paola-Maria Caleffi (paolamaria.caleffi@univr.it) is a PhD Student in English Studies at the University of Verona. She holds a BA in Linguistics and Foreign Language Teaching and an MA in Linguistics. She has experience in teaching English as a foreign language to both young learners and adults. Her main research interests include corpus linguistics, English language and linguistics, language change and language description, English language teaching. Her research project is on the features of English in the digital age, with a special focus on social media.
Paola Caleffi: On the subject of intelligibility, how did you discern which sounds are essential for intelligibility?

GL: Well, there is one interesting aspect to this, which is, ‘intelligible to whom?’. Because it's well established that when people are listening to a language that's not their own mother tongue, they find it easiest to hear the foreign language spoken by people with the same first language. So the easiest English for Italians to understand is English spoken by Italians. And the easiest Italian for English people to understand is Italian spoken by English people. We find it easiest to understand foreign languages if they're spoken with our own sound system. This means that if you're dealing with an English-as-an-International-Language context, or an English-as-a-Lingua-Franca context, with a mixed audience – for example, in a medical conference with people from Saudi Arabia, and Venezuela, and Norway, and New Zealand, and Poland, each one of those different sections finds a different kind of English most intelligible. Poles would ideally like to hear Polish accents of English and Venezuelans would ideally like to hear Spanish accents of English. So intelligibility is a matter of who's listening, and this is one of the big issues. But if you systematically turn something of a blind eye, or a blind ear to that issue, the issue of English as an International Language, and think about the native speaker's point of view only – which is a big “if” – if you focus on the point of view of the English native speakers, then you can measure intelligibility in terms of functional load, which means, you know, for a given contrast, a given vowel contrast for example, does it differentiate a lot of words? A typical Italian problem for example is people taking the vowel of the word ‘dress’ and the vowel of the word ‘trap’, /ɛ/ and /æ/ respectively, and neutralizing them, pronouncing them the same. Higher level Italian learners of English don't do this, but beginners do. The majority of people do. So you get /drɛs/ and /træp/, /frʌnt/ and /bɛk/.

Now, there are many words in English that are differentiated on the basis of one of those vowels. That's tricky, you'd want to focus on precisely those areas where a contrast of native speech is collapsed by non-natives. And it's unnecessary in fact. In many ways the transcriptions you find in dictionaries and textbooks are unhelpful, because you often see this symbol /æ/, most people are very familiar with this symbol, it's quite a pretty symbol. Whenever you see ‘apps’, ‘phonetic apps’, ‘translating apps’, you can almost be certain that it's this letter, a combination of <a> and <e>, sometimes called the letter 'ash'; it's almost always used as a logo whenever you look at phonetics books. Designers of covers of phonetics books love to put this ‘ash’ symbol on the cover, it's a kind of shorthand logo for phonetics. It’s a very dangerous symbol in my opinion; I think that there are many Italians who see that symbol and they think what is means is you see the letter <a> in the writing, and you pronounce /ɛ/ when you speak. Obviously not everybody thinks that, but I think some people do. It kind of gets in the way. And then many speakers of many languages see the symbol /æ/ and use /a/, the sound that corresponds to a written <A> in their language, and will use it in English words like 'cup', as in drinking a /kæp/ and 'I like it very /mæf/'. So you hear people say ‘I like it very /mæf/’ and this is not a good sign. People sometimes be led astray by the so-called phonetic symbols they see.

VF: What can you tell us about the political implications of speaking with an accent?

GL: What I can say is not really politics, maybe it’s sexual politics or something, but one of my favorite groups on Facebook is one that I saw, it was something like Girlfriends against accent reduction. In other words, these are English-speaking women who say ‘we don’t want you to take the accents of our boyfriends away because we like them’. So, it’s not exactly politics, but there are situations in which people see an accent as a desirable part of people’s identity. The most common situation you have with prominent non-native speakers of English, take politicians or movie stars for instance, is that typically they have some accent, and that accent has largely to do with their mother tongue. But also it is often a mixture of American and British, so it's a kind of international accent. Well, I think this is very, very acceptable, everyone takes this for granted and nobody has any difficulty with that as a concept. The common idea in older textbooks was that of saying ‘we must try and push people very precisely in the direction of a narrowly defined native English accent’ – I'm talking really about the so-called Received Pronunciation, RP, which is still common in the TEFL world, the foreign language teaching world as a
concept, but in the academic world of phonetics is decreasingly used now. I think it refers to an accent that was dominant in the 20th century. Nowadays I don’t think many people use it, and it was very narrowly defined, which comes from the fact that it was born out of a social system that was very unequal and based on the domination of a tiny elite. That was a fact of life a hundred years ago or even more recently. In that kind of situation, it made perfect sense for non-natives to want to acquire that accent, a very narrowly defined one, but we live in a world now that is inevitably – and I think most people would say rightly – characterized by greater tolerance and inclusion. I think mixed accents are a fact of life today and people have decreasing reasons to complain. It’s not an intelligibility problem. Mixed accent and vocabulary are part of having an inclusive social system today. And maybe not all native speakers, maybe not all Americans and Brits would agree to this, but a lot of people would agree to the fact that English is an international language now, that it isn’t simply the property of the peoples in those countries where it is the default language of the whole country.

PC: Your website “English speech services” is a website from which you communicate with people that are interested in pronunciation and accent reduction. Your blog, in addition, has a lot of valuable information for people who study phonetics or are interested in these topics. Could you explain how it can be a precious source for non-native speakers of English?

GL: Ok. Well, I started my blog purely on the basis that blogging allows the inclusion of audio samples. I’m not interested in writing about speech without real audible examples. It’s interesting to write about speech, but unless you demonstrate audibly the sounds you’re talking about, it’s very easy for people to get confused. Some people might say ‘Well, this transcription is phonetic. But phonetic transcription is a very, very imperfect tool. People have far too much faith in phonetic transcriptions. There is an International Phonetic Alphabet, and if you’re properly trained in it, you can use it to represent the sounds, hopefully, of any language or dialect, spoken by anybody and anywhere in the world. But it’s unrealistic, totally unrealistic, to think that most people could be trained to that level. Most people, or many people should I say, are exposed to the idea of phonetic symbols only in a context of language learning, chiefly English language learning, and a lot of people seem to think that these symbols have been designed specially for English. In fact, those symbols you see in dictionaries, are used quite broadly. ‘Broad’ is a technical term to mean that the symbols are being used to show contrast, and not necessarily being used to denote precisely the sound qualities intended by the International Phonetic Association. And the end result of this, especially given the fact that English, particularly British English, has changed in its pronunciation considerably, especially in the last half century, and the symbols have changed very little, the end result of this is that the actual sounds have changed a lot, while the transcription used in dictionaries and textbooks has changed hardly at all, though there are beginning to be some changes made now. This means that communicating about pronunciation using transcriptions is a very dangerous thing these days. The symbols are not well understood, they’re not used in a very accurate sense.

So, I started blogging because you can use actual audio clips, and every one of my blog posts is full of audio clips trying to show how English and other languages are actually pronounced. And I’ve got on my blog some accent tutorials and some quizzes that people can use to sort of test themselves. I try to write entertainingly. A lot of people think my blog posts are too long. I know for a fact that the ones that are most popular and most widely read are the shorter ones, but I like to try and cover topics sort of accurately. Most of my posts are probably better described as articles rather than typical blog posts. And the website itself, the non-blog part of the website, has also got lots of audio illustrations. I would just hope that the people who are interested in the details of pronunciation won’t just rely on transcriptions. The dictionaries online for example, they all have audio now. People should trust the audio more than they trust the transcriptions. Transcriptions can be a little misleading. Transcription has its value, for sure, but once symbols start to diverge from the actual sounds, we really need to rely on audio, and the audio capabilities of the web today are stunning. When I was a student there were only a small number of labs in the world that could afford the specialist equipment that could analyze speech acoustically. And today anybody on the planet can download for free the state-of-the-art professional analysis software that the professionals use. This is amazing! This is like living in a paradise! It’s unbelievable what’s happened in my
终身！所以，我认为网络很棒，因为它可以使用视频，可以使用音频，而且在我的学科中极为重要！希望人们能听，睁开耳朵，稍微信任眼睛。我们是视觉动物，我们大脑的大部分都致力于视觉，这就是为什么人们喜欢转录。他们相信他们看到的东西，而人们低估了我们耳朵的力量。我希望我的音频片段能训练人们的耳朵，教育他们的听觉，让他们更像葡萄酒品尝课程，这样他们就能做出更多的区分。

VF：在你的个人网站部分我们可以读到你一直在教授语音和音调，超过二十五年。近来对英语作为国际语言和英语作为国际语言的理论影响您的方法论方法论吗？

GL：我认为它们有。我并不认为自己是英语作为国际语言或英语作为国际语言的专家，但我认为英语比以往任何时候都更国际，而且在以英语为母语的人的世界中，对不同口音的意识大于以往。所以，这种对多样性的更大容忍度意味着比以往任何时候价值都更大。很多工作，如Jennifer Jenkins等人，已经开始关注“什么对学习者来说最重要？”的问题。优先级是这种思维方式对实际教学影响最大的因素。旧的课程以 phonetics为出发点，直以学术的方式工作。例如，你可以说从嘴唇开始，向后滚动，直到喉咙和肺部，以分类为基础，使用声音器官。我不认为这种声音对非母语学习者来说很重要。

所以，我认为说一些方面的发音并不像其他对学习者来说那么重要，这本身就是一个巨大的优势。对自己说，‘好吧，什么才是真正重要的？最困扰你的东西是什么？’。当我教授——总是——一个特点就是抓握每一种误解。它们是黄金。作为人类，我们总是试图用语言交流，误解就会出现，但本能上我们试图忽略这些误解，立即重新表达，修复损失，感到尴尬，想要跳过障碍。而我恰恰相反。我希望立即抓住时间，按暂停键，回放并仔细检查具体发生了什么。因为每次你这样做的时候，你肯定能学到一些非常重要的东西。它会告诉你，这对讲英语的人和讲英语的人在接口之间的问题是什么。抓住错误，把错误看作是一种来自上面的礼物，一种黄金，能告诉你什么出了问题。

PC：好的，谢谢。最后一个问题。我们已经讨论过英语作为国际语言。你认为最近的资源和网站，如YouTube，Facebook，Twitter在非母语学习者对听觉英语语言的感知中起作用吗？

GL：是的，当然！我们生活在一个语言的天堂。人们可以沉浸在以前从未能实现的程度中。一百年前，你只能使用书面材料。你甚至没有像他们过去所说的那样有留声机唱片。而现在我们可以使用到所有这些资源，甚至可以使用到他们称之为Facebook，Twitter的地方。
audio of something. When I teach, by the way, I use the gramophone records made by the founder of phonetics at University College London, Daniel Jones. Well, Daniel Jones is one of the people on whom Bernard Shaw based Henry Higgins. Henry Higgins was based on Henry Sweet, and Daniel Jones, and the real Daniel Jones founded phonetics at University College London and lived long enough to make some gramophone records. So he created the reference system for vowels, which is still used in phonetics. He recorded them, they’re taught to each generation, they’ve been passed on down. I’ve listened to those recordings and I used them to learn these reference vowels myself. But today of course you can expose yourself to all kinds of things. Given the fact that we live in a world that is characterized by diversity.

I mean, when I was young, if you wanted to read the news on the British television, you had to be white, you had to be a man, and you had to speak Received Pronunciation. Now all three of those things, thankfully, are no longer true. You don’t have to be a man, you don’t have to be a white, and you don’t have to speak Received Pronunciation. So, there is greater diversity now and anybody who watches BBC news or listens to BBC news is exposed to a considerable range of accents today.

There’s an aspect that the learner doesn’t like. The learner would like one simple narrow form. But English is such a broad church, it’s such a diverse thing, it covers so many different accents. Even Standard English, the narrowest possible definition of that would have to include Standard American English and Standard British English. I don’t really think you can exclude either of those. Even with the dominance of the United States. Look at the highly successful movies, Harry Potter, Pirates of the Caribbean, The Lord of the Rings, or James Bond. American movies are still full of British English, and both accents are still of considerable importance. So, there’s an element of benefit, in a world of diversity, in having huge amounts of easily and freely available audio material. It’s an incredible gift, it’s a huge bonus, so people should take advantage of it and get themselves a little bit away from the written word, which is important, but people should really start trusting their ears a bit more. Most people learn their foreign languages through their eyes, and pronunciation is an afterthought.

I think, increasingly, we should talk to each other and listen to each other a lot more. All these web resources allow people, those who are interested, to open their ears and I always feel a little glow of pleasure when I listen to non-native speakers who don’t speak the way that dictionaries tell them to. You can tell that they’ve picked up their pronunciations by listening to movies, by listening to the news, by listening to rock music, by listening to whatever. They’ve used their ears, and this is great. This is a great thing!

VF, CF: Thank you very much.

GL: You’re very welcome!