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INTERVIEW WITH DR GEOFF LINDSEY

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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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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 /trɛp/, /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 /ʌ/ 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 /kap/ and 'I like it very /matʃ/'. So you hear people say 'I like it very /matʃ/' and this is not a good sign. People can 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

lifetime! So, I think the web is great because you can use video, you can use audio, and in my subject that's extremely important! Hopefully people can listen, open their ears a little bit and trust their eyes slightly less. We're very visual animals, most of our brains are devoted to vision, that's why people like transcription. They trust what they see, and people underestimate the power of our hearing. So, I hope that my audio clips will train people's ears a little bit, educate their aural palate so that it can be like a wine tasting course, so they can make more distinctions.

VF: In your personal section of the website we can read that you've been teaching pronunciation and accent reduction for more than twenty-five years. Have recent theories on English as a Lingua Franca and English as an International Language influenced your methodological approach throughout this period?

GL: I think they have. I mean, I wouldn't claim to be an expert in theories of English as an International Language or English as a Lingua Franca, but I think the fact is English is more of an international language than it ever was, and also within the world of native speakers of English, the awareness of multiple accents is greater than it ever was. So, there is this greater tolerance for variety and I think valuable work has been done by many people, Jennifer Jenkins and others, getting onto the agenda the idea of saying 'What matters most to the learner?'. Prioritizing. Prioritization is the single biggest effect of that sort of thinking, of that kind of paradigm on practical teaching; the old fashioned way of teaching pronunciation was to take the subject of phonetics as the starting point and simply to work through the sounds in an academic fashion. One way of doing it for example would be to say let's start at the lips and roll backwards until we get to the throat and the lungs and work our way down through the body beneath, down to the bowels, using a classification approach based on the vocal organs. I mean, this is not prioritizing things in terms of what non-natives need to learn. So, I think the idea of saying that some aspects of pronunciation don't matter as much as others for the learner, this itself is a great advantage. To say to yourself, 'Well, what really matters? And what is the most disturbing thing?'.
When I teach – always – one of the things that characterizes my teaching is grabbing hold of every misunderstanding that happens. They're just gold dust. As humans, whenever we try to communicate using languages other than our mother tongue, misunderstandings arise, but instinctively we try to ignore those misunderstandings, we immediately try to rephrase, to repair the damage, we get embarrassed and we want to just simply step over the obstacle. Whereas I do the opposite. I immediately want to freeze time, hit the pause button, wind back and try to really examine closely, precisely what went wrong. Because every time you do that, you can be sure that you will learn something very significant about what matters. It will tell you what is important, what problems are the significant ones that arise in the interface between speakers of that language and speakers of English. Grabbing hold of errors, treating errors as a sort of gift from above, a gold dust that tells you what goes wrong. I mean, for example, just recently, just here on this trip to Verona, I had the experience of saying to a class of students 'Can you see this?' I was pointing to the written materials, and I said 'Can you see this?', and most of the class immediately began to speak – because they thought I'd said 'Can you *say* this?', which told me immediately that there was a confusion in their minds between 'see' and 'say'...and immediately you are given a gift, you are being told by that kind of mistake exactly what you have to work on. And the problem of course is that the vowel of 'see' in English is not the one that the dictionaries tell you that it is. The dictionaries and textbooks tell you it is /iː/ and it isn't, it's /ɪj/, it's a diphthong, and people who are not expecting that will hear the diphthong and think you've said 'say'. It's an example of how the errors that people make...well, I just grab hold of them immediately and use them to learn from.

PC: OK, thank you. One last question. We've talked about English as an International Language . Do you think that recent resources and websites such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter have a role in non-native speakers' perception of the aural English language?

GL: Yes, definitely! We live in a paradise world now for pronunciation. People can immerse themselves to an extent that they never could before. I mean, a hundred years ago, what could you do? You were just restricted to written materials. You didn't even have gramophone records, as they used to be called, to get

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!