

A concise presentation of Natural Phonotonetics – and a note on review(er)s

1. It is not an easy task to explain in few words what Natural Phonotonetics is. In fact, it is something much more complete than traditional General Phonetics. Most linguists and even phoneticians generally have acquired at least part of the official International Phonetic Alphabet (*offIPA*).

They are usually content with it, and seemingly satisfied, because they use it as a sort of simplified ‘phonospelling’, somehow inherited from books published in the last decades. The more stable and unchangeable their transcriptions are, the ‘happier’ they seem to be.

In fact, why undergo further efforts and waste precious energies to improve knowledge and practice? A conventional shared way of showing a kind of phonemic transcription seems to be what anyone needs to fool oneself that one is doing the ‘right thing’ as far as pronunciation is concerned. That is good, say, for 90% of those who use phonetics for practical reasons, *ie* basic teaching or simplified describing purposes.

2. However, if someone only wants to be more precise and accurate, *offIPA* is clearly insufficient. But, without obliging people to change what they are doing, because, as we have just said, they are fully satisfied with what they have and do, there can be no alternative way of improving things.

Especially when also dealing with another language or a regional variant, it is immediately clear that some more precise notations are needed, although someone might still think that adding a few diacritical signs is more than enough. Again, if they are content so, we have no objections at all.

Anyway, those phoneticians who do not content themselves with approximate transcriptions should be free to do what they consider more suitable, without being declared odd or deviant. This is also true for reviewers, who should fully understand the Natural Phonotonetics Method before expressing any evaluation, which –of course– remain personal and subjective. Otherwise, they inevitably risk being unjustly unfair. And this situation is not at all rare.

3. The comic thing is that, if unfairly judged authors rebel answering in kind, they can –inevitably– appear as arrogant and dishonest wrongdoers. In fact, only other Natural Phonotoneticians can adequately evaluate books belonging to their specific domain. Frankly, other people, even if theoretically part of the same scientific domain, may be inevitably blinkered by insufficient preparation, or little interest, and absurd preconceptions.

First of all, our NPT method clearly distinguishes terms (and concepts) such as *sound*, *phone*, *taxophone*, *phoneme*, *diaphoneme*, *xenophoneme*, &c. Of course, also the real meaning and distinction between *phonemic diphthongs* and *phonetic diphthongs* are fundamental.

Otherwise, in the third millennium, someone may still think that German morphologically combined forms like *nabe*, *Ruhe*, [ˈnaʁə, ˈʁuːə] are ‘bisyllabic’, with non-

-existent hiatuses, due to highly misleading *offIPA* $['nɑː.ə, 'kʊ.ə]$.

Instead, *pace* some 'reviewers', they are true *phonetic* diphthongs, although different from official *phonemic diphthongs*: /ae, ao, ɔʏ; ui/ [ae, ao, ɔʏ; ui].

4. Arguably, also the difference between *dialect* and *accent* is very important in our Method. In fact, we present regional accents as simple variants of the same phonemic system, while dialects are really different 'languages' with their own legitimate systems. Otherwise, the descriptions and comparisons of *dialects* and *accents* treated alike would extend old-fashioned unscientific situations –let us insist– still in the third millennium.

Furthermore, our Method requires to fully understand and distinguish the following terms and concepts: *neutral*, *traditional*, *mediatic*, *international*, and *native-like international* accents (among others). Against reality, some less open-minded scholars might not welcome either (*slightly simplified*) *international* or (*native-like*) *international* accents.

There may be some possible (but fully ungrounded) objections (by unprepared people) about using the *native-like international* accents for teaching (foreigners) English, French, German, Spanish, or Portuguese, &c. Such international accents are undeniably something real, as a growing number of actors, anchorpeople and DJ's show (among others). It is not at all difficult to find some of them on the Net.

Of course, in teaching foreigners, even *slightly simplified international* accents are much better than the usual half-English, half-French, half-German, half-Spanish, or half-Portuguese, &c, where the *other half* is more or less clearly formed by the learners' language phonotonic peculiarities.

5. It is also necessary to accurately distinguish between *normative* and *normalized* transcriptions. Let us explain the real meaning of the last. The results of careful analyses of several speakers belonging to the above-mentioned groups, and, even more so, to regional koinés, in order to be really useful, *have* to be normalized. Otherwise, each single speaker examined would be a 'system' of its own (with all acoustic almost chaotic presentations), clearly losing the possibility of any really useful comparisons.

In addition, the principles of convenient geolinguistic cartography should not be ignored, on the pretext of maintaining outdated conventions. Thus, newer definitions and names are surely welcome, in spite of personal preferences. For instance, also for German, reference to North and South, or West and East, are much more useful and satisfying than terms relating to altitude, or to historical events.

Several recordings have to be used in order to describe either neutral and mediatic or regional accents. Sometimes their technical qualities are rather different. So, they are not provided, just to avoid criticisms, as we had to do with some connected to other publications, of even much reduced coverage.

However, anyone else can collect interesting recordings by oneself and compare them with our descriptions and transcriptions, once our symbols and diagrams are surely interpreted, without doubts or mistrust. In fact, it is undeniable that they are more precise than those found in common publications.

6. The important thing is to produce faithful and accurate descriptions, showing all possible variants, either taxophonic or sociophonic. In fact, our different diagrams and very rich symbol inventories are a precious (fundamental, indeed) device to produce all which is needed.

Honest and unbiased comparisons between our symbols & diagrams and those found in practically all other publications will surely show undeniable improvements in describing and teaching pronunciations. Of course, nobody is obliged to follow us, but –at the same time– nobody should be allowed to claim that we are wrong, or complicated, or...

Certainly, sports, or singing, or playing instruments, require particular talents and commitment. Also Natural Phonotactics requires such inevitable gifts. To be frank: it may not be what most people are looking for. Probably, they content themselves with what is simple (and known for a long time) without improvements. However, those of us who want more accurate descriptions and transcriptions can surely rely on our books.

Consequently, readers or reviewers who do not feel at home should only stop, without going into critical, unfair detail. After all, it is quite obvious that Natural Phonotactics is not for everyone.

7. So, it is not even worthwhile trying to clarify certain other objections, which are not such if one actually reads our books, without being blinkered by insufficient preparation and absurd preconceptions.

Let us only add that in our descriptions we show both taxophones and all possible variants found, depending on their frequency, by showing them in convenient and well-considered normalized ways (but avoiding the messy and confusing things we find in usual acoustic treatises, based on debatable recordings of single speakers).

At this point, it is impossible not to refer some puzzling and very rude ‘observations’ found in a review of our book *German Pronunciation & Accents* (2016²) by a certain Franz Hodder, from Austria.

Honest reviews are useful and welcome when they are done after *fully* reading and *understanding* books, by somebody who is really sure to know the *methods and principles* on which a given book is based. In a word: its real spirit.

Otherwise, the result is inevitably a series of false accusations. In fact, Hodder’s ‘review’ is a load of vehement attacks, with no real indication at all of any of the supposed problems denounced.

8. That ‘review’ ended like this (but people who can really see the original book, part of which can be freely downloaded from our *canipa.net* website, can certainly make their own considerations.

Omitting here other falsities, he wrote: *Summarizing, Caneparis’ [sic!] book shows so many phonetic inadequacies, methodologically questionable shortcomings, basic contradictions in the model itself, or crooked statements (cf. the definition of variants and their evaluation) that it cannot be positively evaluated. Conversely, the readers have to be warned not to take the author’s transcriptions as an adequate representation of today’s*

German variants. Adding the sociolinguistic comments on diverse variants and the unclear relation of normative and descriptive factors, the book is a danger for linguists and students to be misled completely when trying to get information about German, phonetically and sociolinguistically.

He also wrote about our ‘phonetically incorrect [...] stereotyped [...] transcriptions’, and ‘more or less invented’, obviously because different from those he is accustomed to. However, § 1-6 of this text of ours summarize explanations for the many points which that ‘expert’ did not catch.

Thus, (un)kindness for (un)kindness, the only thing we could say to him is to *really* read the book thoroughly. Perhaps, this other time, he might understand something better. Or, at least he might realize that he is not fit for Natural Phonotactics.

9. Let us add another example of unfair reporting on the Web of false ‘opinions’, by a certain Alex Rotatori. Talking about our booklet on English Pronunciation for Italians (*Pronuncia inglese per italiani*, 2011³), he fully groundlessly also declared ‘hardly anybody bought it’.

But, there is more to say about him. In fact, speaking of another book of ours, which now has reached its fourth edition under the title *English Pronunciation & Accents* (2016, 900 pages), he dared say ‘[...] which to me looks like a very bad carbon copy of Wells’s *Accents of English*’ (1982, smaller-size 673 pages in all), which, in reality, is quite a different, rather dated book, which deals with much fewer accents, treated in a tendentially popular way, and not fully descriptively, using simple *off*IPA, certainly nothing similar to *can*IPA. Well, if that is not another calumny, what else can it be?

This ‘expert’ is also convinced –from his blog– that *mediatic* Italian /de'koder/ is like *neutral* Italian /de'koder/, for *decoder*, &c. Posterity will judge!

In addition, it would be necessary to say something about those other ‘experts’ who side with someone they know, but without actually knowing the books in question. They just make fools of themselves, and nothing should be added, at all.

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