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BOOK REVIEW

Jacques Durand et Chantal Lyche, *Paul Passy, un linguiste révolutionnaire*. Fribourg: Lambert-Lucas, 2024, 400 pp., ISBN: 978-2-35935-441-6.
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As a lifelong 'dictionary nerd' I was always, as a child, fascinated by the phonetic transcription of word entries positioned next to their conventional spelling. It was only later, when I became a student of applied linguistics and teacher of English as a foreign language, that I learnt about the 'international phonetic alphabet' (IPA). My fascination has continued with the magical symbols that have so often helped me to decode slippery vowel clusters of French (in words like *oie* /wa/, *aiguille* /e.gɥij/, *bouilloire* /bu.jwaʁ/) or to guide me through unpredictable stress patterns in English words (e.g. ignominious /ˌɪgnəˈmɪniəs/). As an undergraduate student my IPA competence was tested by having to transcribe audio recordings of different accents and this served me well when teaching English, not just to represent received pronunciation but also to explain variation. Even today, despite the ubiquity of sound recordings offering authentic pronunciation of unknown words in different languages, I continue to put my faith in the IPA to represent sounds.

This year (2026) marks the 140th anniversary of the IPA, making it an especially opportune time to review its foundation. This beautifully presented and very readable book by Jacques Durand et Chantal Lyche is, however, much more than a history of the IPA and its founder Paul Passy. The authors, both seasoned scholars of Passy and of the history of phonology, have produced a compendious tour de force that can be read on many levels. For those unfamiliar with Passy or his contribution to the history of linguistics, the text provides an accessible source reference, and for scholars who are already familiar with Passy's contribution to phonetics, they will learn a lot more about the man and the wider intellectual climate in which the IPA was developed. As the authors themselves say in Chapter 1 (*Éléments d'orientation*), the book does not need to be read in a linear fashion but can be dipped into and read in sections according to one's interests. Durand and Lyche have succeeded in weaving together a compelling biography, a detailed history of the scientific turn in late nineteenth and early twentieth century phonology, and a rich social history of ideas.

The book has ten chapters with a further Introduction (*Avant-propos*) and a *Conclusion générale*. The chapters follow a loose chronology in the sense that they begin at the beginning but they are also thematic, which improves readability. Chapter 2 deals with Passy's upbringing in a privileged yet politically engaged milieu up to his marriage in 1886 to Édith Ivatts (1857-1931). His father, Frédéric Passy (1822-1912), was a career politician and a prominent pacifist who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1901.

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In the same year as his marriage Paul Passy founded the *Phonetic Teachers' Association* as *dhi fonètik tîtcerz' asóciécon*. The Association would later change its name to French, first as the *Association Phonétique des Professeurs de Langues Vivantes* (1889) and then finally as the *Association Phonétique Internationale* from 1897. Passy was the editor of the Association's journal, originally called *dhi fonètik tîtcer*, then written as *ðə fɔnetik tîtcər* [i.e. *The Phonetic Teacher*], before changing to French as *lə mɛːtrə fɔnetik* and later to conventional orthography as *Le Maître Phonétique* (renamed in English in 1971 to its current title *The Journal of the International Phonetic Association*), with Jones also acting as editor and co-editor at different times.

Daniel Jones (1881-1967), the eminent British phonetician, studied under Passy at the École des Hautes Études in 1905-06 and regarded Passy as a mentor. While in Paris, Jones lodged with Passy's wife's sister and brother-in-law and would marry Cyrille Motte, Passy's niece, in 1911. This family connection strengthened the collaboration between the two men and their respective work in Paris and London as Jones pioneered the teaching of phonetics at the Department of Phonetics at University College London, where he would remain until retirement. (As an amusing anecdote, Jones is said to have inspired Shaw's 'Henry Higgins' character in Pygmalion). Like Jones, Passy's passion for phonetics was driven by a dual aim ("*Passy mène deux combats de front*", p.140): 1) to produce a phonetic alphabet for use in language teaching and 2) to reform French spelling. The objective of spelling reform is a prominent feature of the book, having its own chapter and being woven throughout the narrative. The authors tell us that "*on peut compter au moins une centaine de projets de réforme de l'orthographe en France depuis le XVIe siècle*" (p. 127) and they provide an interesting overview of several key reformers since the early modern period. This again was a shared objective between Passy for French and Jones for English.

The dilemma facing reformers like Passy in the construction of a phonetic alphabet was not only which system of notation to use but which linguistic variety to adopt as the standard. While Jones was a keen advocate for 'received pronunciation' in English, Passy was sensitive to the "*variété infinie*" (p. 85) of possible variants. Even within one family of children raised together he recognized variability, citing as an example the pronunciation of the pair *toi* and *toit* which for him were homophones but for which one of his brothers made a phonetic distinction between /twa/ and /twɑ/, the latter being a more retracted vowel sound.

The difficulty in determining a standard was evident in his struggle over how and where to include the schwa /ə/ in transcribing pronunciation of words like *portera*, which he says in a letter to Norwegian linguist Johan Storm (1836-1920) that he personally pronounces /pɔrtra/, eliding the schwa. In his 1887 *Les sons du francais*, which went on to be re-edited at least a dozen times, Passy identified four registers of spoken language, each having its own speed and rhythm affecting articulation of the schwa (p. 251):

- Slowed down familiar speech (which he advised for teaching)
- Careful (*soignée*) pronunciation
- Very careful (*très soignée*) pronunciation
- Rapid familiar pronunciation

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As was typical of the time, Passy did not provide any criteria for these definitions beyond his own subjective interpretation. He was, however, aware that pronunciation should not simply reflect the norms of a select group of speakers (usually older men) – "*la dialectologie classique a souvent été accusée de s'appuyer quasi exclusivement sur des sujets âgés de sexe masculin*" (p. 118) – and in his early dialectology surveys he collected speech samples from a demographic range of "authorities", for instance 22 individuals aged between 9 and 70 for his study of the *patois de Sainte-Jamme* (p. 117).

Passy's religious convictions underpinned his entire intellectual project. He described himself as a Christian Socialist (entitling his own 1930s autobiography *Souvenirs d'un socialiste chrétien*). He was a very active man ("*toute sa vie il a été en mouvement perpétuel*", p. 44) and navigated a busy academic career with engaged missionary work, which included touring mining and rural communities across France. The ethical motivations of scholars are often erased from linguistic histories and it is a credit to the authors that this important dimension of Passy's life is given full value. Towards the end of the book, the authors consider what Passy's reaction might be to current developments. They suggest he would have been gratified to see the extent to which his legacy has lived on through the IPA as "*un outil essentiel dans la recherche et la description des langues, mais aussi un outil pédagogique à travers toutes les méthodes de prononciation modernes*" (p. 350), while he would have been disappointed to see the limited extent to which there has been any real spelling reform.

This thorough and delightful monograph is an outstanding achievement and I recommend it both as a scholarly reference and a good page-turner.

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