An interview with Peter Ladefoged

Conducted by Alan S. Kaye
United Arab Emirates University
alanskaye@yahoo.com



In this 2005 interview, Peter Ladefoged, Distinguished Professor of Phonetics Emeritus at UCLA and USC Adjunct Professor, spoke candidly about his long and distinguished career as a scholar and instructor, as a former President of the Linguistic Society of America (LSA), and as an editor of the *Journal of the International Phonetic Association* (*JIPA*). Professor Ladefoged died on 24 January 2006, and numerous tributes to him have since appeared, including in *JIPA* 36.1 (June 2006). Among the topics treated in this interview are: the history and future of phonetics, the founding and growth of the UCLA Phonetics Laboratory, and Ladefoged's views on scholarly writing and on the place of phonetics both within linguistics and within humanistic and social scientific disciplines, more broadly. Professor Ladefoged had read proofs of the interview and approved the text, which was completed in the fall of 2005. The text of this interview was originally published in *Semiotica* 158 (2006) and is reprinted here with permission from Mouton de Gruyter.

Alan S. Kaye: Your publication list is quite impressive, and I would think you are very proud of your accomplishments (I sure know that I would be with a list such as yours). What are your favorite pieces, if I forced you to single out a couple of book-length ventures; also your favorite articles and reviews? Why are they your favorites?

Peter Ladefoged: My two favorite books are *Sounds of the World's Languages* (Blackwell, 1996), which Ian Maddieson and I wrote together, and *A Course in Phonetics* (Thomson, 2005). They represent the two sides of my life, research and teaching. *SOWL*, as the first one is usually called, was very much a joint endeavor. I've spent much of my life wandering around the world listening to the sounds of different languages. After a couple of years living in Nigeria and Ghana and visiting other countries in West Africa, I wrote *A Phonetic Study of West African Languages* (Cambridge, 1964), a book that I now see had many weaknesses. The descriptions of the 61 languages investigated were usually based on work with a single speaker, which made some of the conclusions invalid. My next attempt to sum up some

Journal of the International Phonetic Association (2006) 36/2
doi:10.1017/S0025100306002519
© International Phonetic Association
Printed in the United Kingdom
https://doi.org/10.1017/S0025100306002519 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of what I had learned about languages was *Preliminaries to Linguistic Phonetics* (Chicago, 1971), in which I noted 'all the data in the tables are based on my own observations with informants. Similarly I must accept responsibility for all the claims in the text . . . [in] that I have heard native speakers of these languages making the distinctions in the way described'. When we started writing *SOWL* together, I wanted to proceed in much the same way, charging ahead with my own observations, but Ian Maddieson, who is more of a scholar than I am, gently pulled me back, saying 'Peter, lots of other people have written about these languages, and we can't neglect them'. Writing *SOWL* was tough, because we often argued about the importance of different parts of the data. But we had a great respect for each other's writing. When one of us wrote something that the other found difficult in some way, we just rewrote it until we both could be happy with it.

My other favorite book, *A Course in Phonetics*, is far from all mine. I took the basic notions of phonetics that have emerged through the years, and tried to present them in a straightforward way. I've just finished the fifth edition of this book, due out in the summer of 2005. It will be very much updated, with a new CD, and bringing in many of the new ideas developed by others, such as gestural phonetics.

If I'm allowed to go on, I'd like to mention two other books. The first is the very elementary *Vowels and Consonants* (Blackwell, 2nd edn., 2005), in which I have put into practice my belief that we know more about the acoustics of speech than about speech production, and we ought to defy tradition by teaching acoustic phonetics before teaching speech production. The other is my latest book, *Phonetic Data Analysis* (Blackwell, 2003) which is a 'how to' book about collecting and analyzing phonetic data, rather than a book that tries to advance phonetic knowledge. I enjoyed writing this book, as I was able to include many anecdotes about my fieldwork experiences. But, then, I enjoy writing in general. It's something I do with my wife, Jenny. She reads every sentence, and often rewrites them. I rely on her judgment to chisel each paragraph into shape.

Talking about my books is easy, because I have them to hand. It's much more difficult to discuss possible favorite articles, as they are scattered in different places. I've written about 150 papers, some of which are worth so little that I don't even list them in my CV. Others were fine when they first appeared but are now hopelessly outdated. I don't write many reviews, so there's not much to say with respect to them. I enjoyed writing a review (Ladefoged 2000) of the biography of Daniel Jones, the first Professor of Phonetics in Britain, by Collins and Mees (1998). It's a great book, a wonderful account of the beginnings of twentieth-century phonetics in Britain and its antecedents on the continent. Writing the review gave me an opportunity to say something about my own work with Daniel Jones.

ASK: What do you think your influence has been over the past forty years in linguistics in general and in phonetics in particular?

PL: This is something I have not thought about, and I'm uneasy talking about myself in this way. Others can say better than I can if I have had any influence in linguistics. I think I was the first person working exclusively in phonetics to become President of the Linguistic Society of America, and probably one of the few recent Presidents of the LSA who have never studied syntax at all, which makes me feel very ignorant at times. It's something I'm not at all proud of. I'm not sure about what influence I have had in phonetics, either. Obviously the textbook, *A Course in Phonetics*, has successfully demonstrated one view of phonetics, but it's certainly open to criticism. It is not really a book about general phonetics. It does not say enough about experimental phonetics – perceptual experiments are hardly mentioned, acoustic phonetics is given only one chapter, and the latest advances in physiological investigations are virtually ignored. Conversely, for a general phonetics book it says too much about English. But the balance among phonetic topics that it presents makes it a good textbook for a wide range of people.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0025100306002519 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ASK: How have linguistics and phonetics changed since you first came to UCLA?

PL: At a recent symposium honoring the work of Ken Stevens over the last 50 years, I gave a paper on 'Phonetics and phonology in the last 50 years'. I noted that there have been steady gains in phonetic knowledge and punctuated equilibrium in phonological theories. Phonetics has been making regular progress over the years, as phoneticians worldwide have made more use of acoustic phonetic techniques, found new ways of investigating physiological phenomena, conducted more perceptual experiments, and made observations of many more languages. Phonology has lurched forward over the last half century, some of the lurches being due to new phonetic knowledge. Gunnar Fant played a major role in changing phonology by his collaboration in the Jakobsonian statement of distinctive feature theory in 1952. Then we had another revolution when Chomsky and Halle (1968) introduced a mentalist view of phonological features in *The Sound Pattern of English*. Since then we have passed through Autosegmental Phonology and on to Optimality Theory, proposing a new way of relating phonological contrasts and phonetic data. Now Articulatory Phonology (which has very little to do with traditional phonology) shows great promise, providing a more testable approach to the role of phonetics in linguistic descriptions.

ASK: Can you tell us something about your current role as an Editor of the *Journal of the International Phonetic Association*?

PL: In 2000 I was appointed one of the editors of the *Journal of the International Phonetic Association*, commonly referred to as *JIPA*. This was my third appearance in this role. My first appearance was in the mid-1980s, when the *Journal* was over two years late in coming out and I, very much along with my wife Jenny, took on being editor/publisher. It was our first major venture into desktop publishing. For the sake of continuity we had to take the papers that had been submitted and accepted a year or two previously and produce them in a form similar to that used for previous volumes, a slim 72-page issue with the then-traditional green cover. After that single issue and the election of a new editor, *JIPA* came out regularly for a while. Then there was another crisis in 1990, when the editor somewhat suddenly resigned and it again fell to our lot to see that something was produced. After only a single issue we were able to hand over to an elected editor and for a few years *JIPA* came out regularly and only a little late. Then the publication date started slipping again and in 1999 we had to take over once more. The following year, John Local, Linda Shockey and I were officially appointed editors. For a while I did most of the editing and (always with Jenny) the page composition and publishing. We got the journal going again, and Klaus Kohler and John Esling, the President and Secretary of the Association, respectively, were able to arrange for Cambridge University Press to take over as publisher in 2001. In 2003 John Esling was elected editor, and my role as his co-editor (along with Linda Shockey) has become smaller.

One of my innovations was the total revision of the series 'Illustrations of the IPA'. This used to be a set of short, often only half a page, pieces in which there was a paragraph describing the conventions for using IPA symbols when transcribing a particular language, followed by an exemplifying passage, almost always a translation of Aesop's fable of the North Wind and the Sun. These pieces were, as the name says, illustrations (of the use of) the IPA for making phonetic transcriptions in different languages. I changed them into four- or five-page descriptions (which sometimes got a little longer) of the major phonetic structures of each language, writing the first one, on Californian English, myself and providing guidelines for future contributors. With hindsight, I should have changed the name at the same time, as they are more illustrations of the languages than of IPA symbols. We have now published over 70 of these accounts of the phonetic structures of different languages, and more are coming out in almost every issue. The next edition of the *Handbook of the IPA* will contain all of them,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0025100306002519 Published online by Cambridge University Press

making it a valuable source of information on the phonological inventories and the phonetic structures of a wide range of languages.

ASK: You have seen many linguists come and go over the years – literally and metaphorically speaking. In retrospect, who would you rank as the very top three or four linguists of the last half century and why?

PL: There surely can be no doubt that Noam Chomsky has been the major linguist of the last fifty years. He has been very successful in leading us away from fuzzy descriptions to testable formalisms. It would be invidious to name others.

ASK: How would you evaluate the writings of Henry Sweet, Daniel Jones and David Abercrombie for the contemporary linguistic scene?

PL: I think one has to go back a little further and consider Sweet's predecessors who, with him, built the British school of phonetics. Sweet's organic alphabet is a direct descendant of Bell's *Visible Speech*, published in 1867, which was a milestone in the advancement of phonetic knowledge. Sweet developed his own Broad Romic transcription and discussed a wide range of languages. But important as Sweet was because of the depth of his knowledge, it was Daniel Jones who really set British Phonetics on a solid foundation. If he had not started the Phonetics Department at University College London, Sweet's erudition might have had no continuation. Daniel Jones himself considered his foremost achievements to have been his work on Sechuana (Jones 1916) and his *English Pronouncing Dictionary* (Jones 1917, 1st edn.; 1956 11th edn.). To these must be added his *Outline of English Phonetics* (Jones 1917) and his development of the Cardinal Vowel theory. Jones's view of phonetics was always pragmatic. He studied different theoretical positions so that he could find out which was the most helpful for what he saw as the principal purpose of phonetics, pronunciation teaching. Laboratory phonetics was useful if it enabled him to verify facts that he could pass on to language learners. He was truly concerned with using his talents to help improve world relations through better communication.

Jones had numerous students who went on to great careers in phonetics, one of whom was my teacher, David Abercrombie, who changed the field in an interesting way. Previously phonetics was not considered to be a university subject in which one could get a degree. Abercrombie taught general phonetics, rather than the pronunciation of particular languages. He also realized that communication engineers were going to need help from people who knew all aspects of speech, and, though not an experimentalist himself, made sure that his department had a fine laboratory.

ASK: You mentioned earlier that you had worked with Daniel Jones. Tell us more about that.

PL: Daniel Jones had retired before I started studying phonetics. David Abercrombie arranged a grant so that he could help me with a study of the acoustics of cardinal vowels. I visited Jones in his home in a London suburb, and he came up to London to supervise recordings of cardinal vowels by his former students, now on university faculties. He was a strict but encouraging teacher. It was during one of my visits that I asked him about his x-rays of cardinal vowels. I knew that he had pictures of all eight vowels but had published only four of them. When I asked him why he had never published the other four, he answered, 'People would have found them too confusing', a tacit admission that they did not really support his notion about equal tongue movements between each vowel.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0025100306002519 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ASK: The name Noam Chomsky is almost synonymous with linguistics today. What is your opinion about him and the Chomskyan Paradigm? What are your reactions to his work and his influence on the field and related ones?

PL: Without Chomsky linguistics would never have acquired the importance it has in contemporary thought. He has the keenest mind and the sharpest insights of any scholar in the last half of the twentieth century. But I don't think his influence has always been for the good. He has offered only one way of looking at language, a mentalist approach, and has been rather scornful of other approaches. But as well as being a mental concept, a language is also a social institution, like the economy or fashions in dress. We all know (or, as Chomsky might put it, have mental concepts) of how to buy and sell things, but nobody imagines that the entire structure of economic exchanges could be in the mind of an individual. Linguists should at times have a mentalist view, but they should also consider languages as social institutions. There are parts of a language, such as the 500,000 words in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, that could not be in any one mind. Trying to have a mentalist view of an ideal speaker who could know all these words does not make sense. It overlooks the fact that the brain does not have the capability. The words in the *OED* (or *Webster's*) are all part of the language considered as the product of a community, and if we don't describe them, we are not describing the complete language. Language is not only in the mind. There's much more of it outside in the community. One way of regarding linguistics is to consider it, as Chomsky suggests, fundamentally a part of psychology. But it is also part of sociology.

ASK: Since you have discussed some trends in the field, can you give us more details about your beginnings – teachers, contemporary fellow students, and first colleagues?

PL: David Abercrombie provided a home in phonetics for me. He had a clear, logical mind and a new view of phonetics, as I have already said. When I was a student, Betsy Uldall was the only other instructor in the [Edinburgh] Phonetics Department, a good practical phonetician who I regarded as my favorite phonetic aunt for many years. Also within the department, James Anthony taught me basic electronic skills and was always much more than technical support for the lab. He was a leader pushing us on to the latest technology.

I learned a great deal from people outside the department. Ian Catford was leading the Linguistic Survey of Scotland and showing us how to describe the phonetic structures of languages. David Whitteridge, the Professor of Physiology, taught me how to be a scientist, how to do experiments and to keep proper records. I still have my protocol books going back to 1956 so that I can say what I did in the lab from day to day. I learned a lot from Walter Lawrence who invented PAT, the Parametric Artificial Talker, and taught me how to synthesize speech. Donald Broadbent, at that time a rising star in the MRC Experimental Psychology Unit at Cambridge, got me started in perceptual phonetic studies and, more importantly, thinking about how to construct models of human behavior. All these people were very significant in the beginning of my academic career.

ASK: What were your favorite teaching activities over the years and why?

PL: Writing textbooks. I like trying to clarify my own ideas about basic aspects of phonetics. Putting them in the simple form that is necessary for a textbook forces me to think them through. I wrote my first book, *Elements of Acoustic Phonetics*, while I was a graduate student. It enabled me to make sure that I had grasped what I had read about speech and acoustics. The publisher's reviewer for the book, Martin Joos, made a lot of nice remarks, and

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0025100306002519 Published online by Cambridge University Press

finished by saying: 'He sometimes uses my own words, but in a way that shows he clearly understands them'. I like that. It is what a textbook writer should do.

ASK: Have you ever wanted to write an introductory linguistics textbook covering the entire field (perhaps except syntax)?

PL: I've thought about it, but it's not my sort of project. I'm happy writing textbooks about things that I know and use in my own teaching and research. As I said, this helps me clarify my own thinking. But I don't want to research a topic simply so that I can write a textbook about it. I'd rather spend my time thinking about my own field.

ASK: What do you consider to be the most outstanding of your own accomplishments over the entirety of your career?

PL: Building a phonetics lab; and of course I don't mean the equipment, I mean the people, the faculty, post-docs, and students who identified themselves as belonging to the Phonetics Lab group. When I came to UCLA in 1962, I knew that I wanted to have a group of people working on phonetics. Bob Stockwell, who had recruited me, was very encouraging and had already got a lab started with a Kay spectrograph, an Ampex recorder and a sound-proof room. I had drafted a grant proposal even before I arrived, and by that first October I had negotiated my way through the UCLA bureaucracy. They were not used to Assistant Professors of English (as I was at that time) submitting large scientific proposals. I was able to meet the NIH [National Institutes of Health] fall deadline, and the proposal was funded before the end of my first academic year, putting the UCLA Phonetics Lab well on its way.

Running a phonetics lab is not only a matter of writing proposals that get funded, but also putting effort into making sure that people work together. I tried to walk around the lab and talk to everyone every day. In addition, as a requirement of having a desk in the phonetics lab, all the students, researchers and technical staff were asked to attend the lab meeting that was held at the beginning of the 4 p.m. Monday seminars. If they were not interested in the seminar topic, they could leave after the discussion of how lab money should be spent, what needed maintenance and what new computer programs were urgently required. Meetings like this made sure that people realized they were part of a group with interests in common. Many of us also met nearly every day for lunch. At one time the UCLA Phonetics Lab was one of the few places where you could drop in most days and eat your sandwich with five or six PhDs in phonetics, faculty, visiting scholars and post-docs, plus a group of interesting grad students. A great deal of lab business happened over lunch.

ASK: Let's get back to your scholarly pursuits, if we could. I would imagine that you are a very hard-working individual and extremely disciplined to have written as much as you have. Can you pass on some tips to those of us who have the desire to write more just how you have managed to do so all these years? Does writing come easy for you?

PL: I've always enjoyed writing, largely, I suspect, as a result of a British education in which it was encouraged. We learned to write much in the same way as we learned to talk. We were never taught grammar, but we had to write masses of essays that were corrected whenever we made an error without any explanation of the underlying grammar. Exercises such as writing a weekly précis, in which three paragraphs had to be turned into one, also taught us how to organize our thoughts coherently and cut out unnecessary words. The best way to learn to write is to write and rewrite a lot. I'm often amazed by people giving me things to read that they have never read through themselves.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0025100306002519 Published online by Cambridge University Press

And I've always found it helpful to stop at the end of the day in the middle of a paragraph, or perhaps in the middle of a sentence. That makes it much easier to start again, even after a long break.

ASK: Speaking of writing, can you tell us whether there are some pieces (reviews, etc.) which you regret having published? There are a few linguists who have confided to me that they regret a few items they wrote in their youth. I wonder if you have any regrets at all which you would like to share with us?

PL: I was sorting some early papers recently and came across a review that started: 'This book is so bad that it does not deserve a review', and then went on to demonstrate all the errors in a new textbook by an elderly scholar. I regret that I was so brash and unkind. But on the whole I've managed to restrain my wrath at the occasional bit of bad phonetics and trust that good work will chase out bad.

Some of the things that I wrote early in my career have turned out to be wrong. For example, it is only a half-truth that the quality of a vowel is dependent on the relation between the formants of that vowel and the formants of other vowels in the sentence. The experiments that we could do using synthetic speech at that time were limited, and I don't regret publishing them in a prestigious journal. But it does show that even if you read something in a scientific journal like *Nature*, it may not be right.

ASK: Now that you are retired and no longer working out of your laboratory and university office, how is your day structured since you are continuing your scholarly work? And, by the way, what are your current projects?

PL: I've just finished teaching a once-a-week seminar class at USC on the problems in describing speech sounds. Next semester, Fall 2005, I'll be teaching the same course at Edinburgh University. These two groups of people have very different backgrounds, and I hope that after I have discussed the problems with both of them I'll know enough to write a book showing how far phonetics has to go before we can give reliable, verifiable, descriptions of the sounds of the world's languages.

My thoughts at the moment are that we should try to describe the linguistic aspects of speech sounds in terms of the articulatory parameters outlined by Louis Goldstein and Cathe Browman in their Articulatory Phonology. If we can synthesize speech accurately in an expanded version of their framework, we at least have a reliable, verifiable description, even if our description is not in terms of what people actually do when talking. This is hardly a new view on my part. My first NIH proposal, in 1962, was to construct an articulatory synthesizer that could synthesize the sounds of the world's languages. It's only as we learn more about the data that we realize the magnitude of this problem. I'm no longer offering to try to specify the complete set of parameters needed for an articulatory synthesizer. I'll just try to lay out how complex an undertaking this is.

ASK: Since you have told us that you traveled a lot and have worked on many different languages over the years, can you let us know something about your favorite trips and languages you have researched? Which are the countries you would most enjoy returning to for further research and why?

PL: I enjoy traveling, and there is hardly a place I would not like to go back to. We lived as a family for two years in West Africa, our youngest child being born in Nigeria. Later we all had a pleasant year in Uganda, where elephants sometimes interrupted our fieldwork.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0025100306002519 Published online by Cambridge University Press

I've visited out-of-the-way places with local scholars in Australia, and Jenny and I have good memories of working in India. Tony Traill took me into the Kalahari Desert, where we once had to stop while waiting for a pride of lions to move off the track. More recently Jenny and I went back into the Kalahari with other scholars and enjoyed watching giraffes and chasing ostriches along dirt roads, as well as making aerodynamic recordings of friendly Bushmen. The Amazonian rain forest and the Aleutian Islands are as different as places can be, but I'm glad to have been in both of them. Nearer home, working with Sally Thomason on Montana Salish was as spectacular as seeing the flamingos in distant Kenya. And maybe one day we'll go back to Nepal and the Himalayas. The world is a wonderful place.

ASK: No interview would be complete if I did not ask you where you see phonetics heading in the next decade or two? What are the most interesting areas in phonetics you think graduate students and peers should focus on?

PL: There will always be many different kinds of phonetic research. Those of us who like wandering around the world looking for previously unrecorded sounds will no doubt continue to do so. (I heard a contrast that was new to me just last month when I was in Ethiopia, a three way contrast in Kambaata between an intervocalic voiced liquid, /r/ or /l/, the same liquid with laryngealized voicing, and the same liquid preceded by a glottal stop.) Other phoneticians will continue with systematizing intonation and tone contrasts, which is much needed work if we are to get natural sounding synthetic speech – which is in itself a great field for phonetic research. There's also still much to learn about how we listen to speech, and new experimental techniques such as MRI are showering us with information about articulatory gestures. I suspect we can all be busy for many generations.

References

COLLINS, BEVERLEY & MEES, INGER M. (1998). *The Real Professor Higgins: The Life and Career of Daniel Jones*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

LADEFOGED, PETER (2000). Review of Collins & Mees (1998). *Language* **76**, 191–193.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0025100306002519 Published online by Cambridge University Press