

## IMPORTANCE OF PHONETICS IN LINGUISTIC STUDIES

R. H. Robins  
Department of Linguistics  
School of Oriental and African Studies  
University of London

*This is a transcribed version of the remark made by Prof. R.H. Robins in answer to Prof. Yu's question on the importance of phonetics in linguistics in British universities during the 2nd International Conference on Linguistics held in Seoul, Korea (Dec. 3-6, 1981). Prof. Robins was invited to the Conference as one of the five special guests.*

Prof. Yu: I should like to ask you a question about phonetics. I'd like to know how much importance or emphasis is put on phonetics in the linguistic course in British universities.

Prof. Robins: Well, I could answer that in one mono-syllable, "Yes". Phonetics is utmost importance in Linguistics, and in London and indeed in almost any school of linguistics in Great Britain, courses in phonetics are introduced into linguistics from the start. Now I would like to spend a little moment or two on this because I think, again, the question you've asked is of enormous importance. In my opinion, and I think all my London colleagues share this view, phonetics is a part of linguistics, indeed an essential part of linguistics. I know that the departments in University College and School of Oriental and African Studies which are the two colleges where linguistics is studied in London have the title "Department of Phonetics and Linguistics", but this is not like Department of French and Italian. Department of Phonetics and Linguistics is in a sense a misnomer. You might as well call it "Department of Syntax and Linguistics". The reason is historical; that phonetics was a branch of linguistics developed first. In England there was a professorship of phonetics. Daniel

Jones held it for thirty years before there was a professorship of linguistics in general. And the title sticks. Obviously, you have people specialize in phonetics. Prof. Henderson who was here ten years ago is a professor of phonetics. This doesn't mean to say that she's not concerned with linguistics. But nobody can specialize in the whole field any longer. We have specialists, I mean not just in London, but I mean there are specialists in historical linguistics, in applied linguistics, it's all part of linguistics and in phonetics. That is part of linguistics. So that there is no question. You cannot do linguistics without doing phonetics any more than we can do linguistics without doing syntax. Of course, courses in phonetics are specialized whether they be in general phonetics or in the phonetics of a particular language, but in answer to your, your first question or at any rate to one of your questions, "Is phonetics a part of teaching of linguistics in universities in Great Britain?", the answer is "Yes" at all levels. But I'd like to go further than this because what is interesting is not so much what happens in the particular group of universities but what the subject is about, and if you think for a bit of the history of human language, then you cannot avoid making phonetics absolutely fundamental to the study of linguistics. After all, linguistics is the study of the history and the working of human language, and human language has been going on at least for many hundreds of thousands of years. The species that we pride ourselves on belonging to, homo sapiens we think because we speak, and human speech and human thinking developed pari passu.

Now the history of humans as a distinctive species is a matter of controversy but is at least hundreds of thousands, if not millions of years old. And how old is the earliest writing system of which we have any knowledge? About five thousand years at most. I mean, if this is where humans began, this is about where writing began, so that human language as we know it now and as you can get at it in the past, has been handed down from generation to generation, has been framed and developed entirely as "speech" until the last five thousand years.

We don't normally talk in an anechoic chamber. We talk against various background noises. We talk and we've got to make noises that we can make with our vocal tract. I mean, we can't produce a sound by touching the tip of our nose with our tongue because the tongue isn't long enough to get there. Equally, we've got to make noises that human ear can process. All of these features: short-term memory, linearity, the competing noises in the channel and so on. All of these are what of conditioned human language, whatever language it may be; the Korean language, the English language, Latin and so on. So that no matter whether your concern is only with a written language in the past that you can not reconstruct its pronunciation. Nevertheless, you are studying fossilized speech. I mean language is speech. As I have said, every human being learns to speak before he learns to write and even highly literate people like us, we do far more talking than we do writing and far more hearing than we do reading, so that the conditions under which language works are those of speech and speech is studied by phonetics. Phonetics is the basis of linguistics, so to speak. It is absolutely essential in linguistics. And if I couldn't tell you that phonetics is an integral part of courses in linguistics in British universities, then linguistics in British universities would be in a very poor way because phonetics is absolutely essential. Don't be misled by having titles like Department of Phonetics and Linguistics. Don't be misled by having separate institutions. There is the Korean Phonetic Society and there is also the Korean Language Society but this doesn't mean that the Korean phonetics is something different from the Korean language or that you could study the Korean language without studying Korean phonetics. The point is that this is simply that in a complex field, and language is complex and linguistics is now a complex science, everybody can't do everything. I mean, surgery is part of medicine but that doesn't mean to say every doctor is a surgeon. And you'll have a college of surgeons and a college of general practitioners but this does not mean to say that surgery isn't part of practice, of medical practice but it's essential. Phonetics is an essential part of linguistics, There is no place for

a linguist who says, "Well, I'm interested in syntax. I am not interested in speech." Well, no good. Equally, there is no place for a phonetician who says, "I am not interested in syntax. What I'm interested in is the minute differences between speech sounds." What's the point of differences between speech sounds except as exponents of syntactic constructions and lexical elements? How can we study syntax if you don't study the substance through which syntax is manifested and if you don't take into account the conditions limiting syntactic structures, namely; the short-term memory and linearity?

So I come back to the point that language is essentially speech. Until recently it was entirely speech, its nature, the conditions of its use and the conditions of its acquisition are wholly speech. Children learn to speak before they learn to write, and what's more, they learn to speak without being taught to speak. They don't learn to write and read without being taught to read and write. That's why they go to school among other things. So that phonetics is absolutely essential and British universities recognize that facts and organize their teaching in that ways as much as universities here and every where else in the world where linguistics is respectively dealt with have the same essential orientation.

<국 문 요 약>

{언 어 학 에 있 어 서 음 성 학 의 중 요 성 }

런던대학 음성학및 언어학과장  
아 에이취 러우빈스

유 만근 교수 질문 : 음성학에 관하여 질문하고 싶습니다. 영국대학의 언어학 교육 과정에서 음성학이 차지하는 비중이 얼마나 큰지 알고 싶습니다.

러우빈스 교수 응답 : 네, 그 질문에 한 마디로 긍정적인 답변을 할 수 있습니다. 음성학은 언어학에서 대단히 중요한 위치를 차지하며

런던대학 뿐만이 아니라, 영국의 어느 대학에서나 음성학은 언어학에  
초기부터 도입됩니다. 지금 하신 질문은 대단히 중요한 문제이므로  
좀 더 자세히 설명하겠습니다. 런던의 동료와 마찬가지로 나는  
음성학이 언어학의 일부일뿐 아니라 실로 필수적인 분야라고 봅니다.  
런던대학내에는 "음성학 및 언어학과" 라는 학과가 두 군데나 있는데  
이는 "발어 및 이태리어과" 라는 식의 명칭과는 의미가 다릅니다. 이  
러한 명칭의 배후에는 역사적인 이유가 있습니다. 음성학은 언어학의  
본과중에서 가장 먼저 발전하였으며, 영국에서는 음성학 교수직이 언  
어학 교수직보다 30년이나 먼저 생겼습니다. 바로 데니얼 저슨스가  
최초로 음성학 교수직을 얻어 30년이나 봉직했던 것입니다. 이러한  
이유로 학과의 명칭이 아직도 그대로 존속하는 것입니다. 10년 전에  
한국에 왔던 헨더슨 교수 역시 음성학 교수입니다 만, 그렇다고 그 가  
언어학에 관심이 없는 것은 아닙니다. 이제는 아무도 언어학의 전  
분야를 모두 전공할 수는 없습니다. 그래서, 언어학에는 역사언어학,  
응용언어학, 음성학 같은 분야별 전문가가 있기 마련입니다.

그러나, 통사론을 하지 않고 언어학을 할 수 없는 것과 마찬가지로  
음성학을 하지 않고는 언어학을 할 수가 없습니다. 물론, 음성학  
안에서도 일반음성학이나 개별어의 음성학이나에 따라서 전문이 세  
분될 수 있습니다만, "음성학이 영국 대학의 언어학 교육 과정의 일  
부인가?" 라는 질문에 대한 답변은 자명할 것입니다. 한결음 더 나아  
가서, 인간 언어의 역사를 잠시 생각해 보면 음성학이 언어학 연구에  
없어서는 안될 필수적인 것을 알겁니다. 결국 언어학이란 인간 언어  
의 역사와 운용을 연구하는 것이고 인간의 언어란 수천년을 내려왔으  
나, 글자가 생기기 전까지는 손전히 음성언어, 즉 소리말로 존재했습니  
다. 한국어이건 영어이건, 라틴어이건 언어는 모두 발음 기관으로 발음  
할 수 있고 귀로 들을 수 있는 소리로 되어 있으며, 이미 죽은 말을  
다들 때에도 결국 확실화한 소리말을 연구한다고 보는 것입니다. 즉 언  
어란 바로 소리말입니다. 사람은 글자를 배우기 앞서서 말을 배우며  
우리같이 고등 교육을 받은 사람도 쓰기와 읽기보다는 말하기와 듣기

를 훨씬 많이 합니다. 이 같이 언어는 소리말로 운용되는데, 바로 소리말을 연구하는 것이 음성학이므로 음성학은 언어학의 기본이요, 필수입니다. 음성학이 영국의 언어학에서 중요한 기본을 이루고 있다고 말할 수 없다면 영국의 언어학은 그 만큼 빈약하게 될 것입니다. 한국에 음성학회가 있고 또 한글학회가 있지만, 그렇다고 하여 한국어 음성학이 한국어와는 다른 것이라거나, 한국어 음성학을 공부하지 않고 한국어를 연구할 수 있다는 뜻은 아닙니다. 의학에도 분야마다 전문의가 있듯이, 언어학도 이제 복잡하고 광범한 학문이 되었으므로 분야별로 전문가가 나오게 된 것 뿐입니다. 따라서 "나는 통사론에 관심이 있으므로 소리말에는 관심이 없다"고 말하는 언어학자가 있다면, 이것은 크게 잘못된 것입니다. 마찬가지로 "나는 소리에만 관심이 있으므로 통사론에는 관심이 없다"고 말하는 음성학자가 있다면, 이 또한 안되는 일입니다. 문의 구성과 어휘 요소와 아무 관련이 없는 말소리의 차이가 무슨 소용이 있으며, 통사 구조를 표현하고 전달하는 말소리를 연구하지 않고 어떻게 통사론을 연구할 수 있겠습니까?

다시 간추리면, 언어는 본질적으로 소리말이고, 언어의 특성과 사용 및 습득도 모두 소리말 형태로 나타납니다. 따라서, 영국의 대학은 음성학이 대단히 중요함을 인식하고, 언어학을 올바르게 다루는 세계의 여러 다른 대학과 마찬가지로 이에 따라 교육 과정을 편성하고 있습니다.

<< 이 글은 1981년 12월 4일, 한글학회 창립 60돌 기념 제 2 차 세계 언어학자대회에 특별 연사로 초청된 아 에이취 러우빈스 교수가 강연에 이어 열린 토론회에서 질문에 답한 내용을 간추려서 옮긴 것이다. 러우빈스 교수는 현재 런던대학 음성 언어학과 과장이며 영국언어학회(Philological Society)의 명예 총무이다. >>