

Phonology for Listening

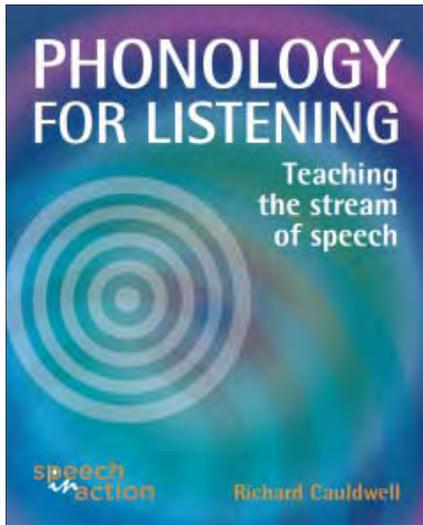
Teaching the streaming of speech

Richard Cauldwell

Speech in Action

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“(It’s) akin to stumbling through a dense fog in which only isolated features of the landscape stand out clearly.” That’s pronunciation expert Jonathan Marks talking about the experience many learners of English have with listening. Others have described listening as a “mysterious black box”; but most seem to agree that whether you are a teacher or a learner, listening is the skill that you tend to have a funny feeling about, the one you know you should do more of, but never have a very satisfactory experience with.

So that was a sentence with three prepositions in places they shouldn’t be (in). It may not follow the rules, but this is the way lots of us actually use English. And that, applied to spoken English, is the basic premise behind Cauldwell’s book.

He describes the teaching of listening as divided into three types: “Greenhouse” English, where grammar and words are dealt with in isolation, in a clipped, cultivated form. In this sort of methodology, for example, a listening text might be a text that has been written to include lots of present perfect forms, which has then been read aloud slowly and

carefully for the audio CD. Then there is “garden” spoken English, where features of connected speech are examined, and examples are listened to, (speakers saying “gonna” for example) but everything is still very tidy.

And then there is “jungle” English: real-world, unscripted, genuine, spontaneous English. You might know your exotic plants when you see them in the Botanical Gardens, but when they are growing in the jungle, it’s difficult to see where one piece of vegetation finishes and the next one starts, and lots of important plants are hidden altogether, so that only some people who have spent a lot of time in the jungle (aka native speakers) know they are there. It’s the listening jungle that Richard Cauldwell is exploring in *Phonology for Listening*, and it is a very messy place.

For all that, the book has a very tidy structure. In the first part, Cauldwell describes his framework, the window on speech. Here, he introduces Ying, and her dilemma. Ying is a Singaporean learner who wrote in a diary entry: “I believe I need to know what the word sounds like when it is used in the sentence. Because... I couldn’t catch it. Maybe it changes somewhere when it is used in a sentence.” (ibid. p.15). Cauldwell calls the moments where these changes occur “Ying moments”, and goes on to look through the window at how natural spoken English is divided into different speech units, depending on where the stressed syllables are.

The second part looks at the stream of natural speech, which, with all its changes of rhythm, pauses, ums and ahs, restarts and repetitions, differs greatly from the careful speech often used in coursebook audio.

Part three looks at accents and emotions in speech, what Cauldwell calls the “flavourings and colourings”, and in part four, he introduces practical classroom ideas, both low and high-tech, that can be used to help students learn to listen.

Throughout the book, Cauldwell reiterates his main aim, which is to help students to decode natural, spontaneous speech. For example, he takes a simple sentence:

“It’s the second largest city in my country, I think”. This can be said in a “garden”, textbook version with stress on the content words:

“It’s the SECond BIGges CITY in my COUNTRy I think.” In reality, though, it may be spoken quite differently if the speaker is thinking aloud. Then it may well be that the stresses are different at the beginning of the sentence, as the speaker pauses to think. The rest of the sentence may be spoken very fast:

IT’S THE SECond BIGgestcityin-myCOUNTRyIthink...

To examine the squeezes and other changes that happen to words he takes the sentence:

“I realized that I’d left my purse at home”. Said in the jungle, the whole of the middle of the sentence might be squeezed between the stressed REA of “realized” and PURSE, so it might be difficult to pick out a “d” marking the past simple in “realized”, and indeed the whole middle section might just sound like “a(t) alefma”. Definitely a Ying moment.

In this book, Cauldwell manages to guide teachers through this jungle step by step, while expressing a tangible love of English and a delight at the way it is spoken. Some of the language used to describe spontaneous speech and the way teachers can work with it is lovely: take a look at this book and you’ll become familiar with savouring and squeeze zones, soundscapes and stepping stones.

If you are a teacher, this book may “lift the fog”, as Jonathan Marks says it does, possibly even changing your listening life and that of your learners. It’s up for two prestigious awards this year, and Richard Cauldwell, a most modest, wry fellow from what I could ascertain at his IATEFL talk this year, certainly seems to deserve it. See him in action here: <http://tinyurl.com/k4nj2eu>

Jo Westcombe