Book reviews

A critical introduction to phonology


Reviewed by Stephanie Claire

A critical introduction to phonology, subtitled Of sound, mind and body, by Daniel Silverman is a recent title in the Continuum Critical Introductions to Linguistics series. Silverman views phonology as ‘a self-organised and self-sustaining system of social conventions that passively evolves as a consequence of language use’ (p vii).

Although his use of the word passively might be queried by some, Silverman’s approach to phonology is quite unusual and his book contains a number of insights into linguistic sound systems that will intrigue linguists and non-linguists alike. Indeed, A critical introduction to phonology has been written very much with the aim of opening a dialogue between linguists and experts in a number of other fields such as anthropology, philosophy, psychology and evolutionary biology. Silverman has observed that members of these disciplines often have an interest in linguistics but find the ‘theoretical intricacies’ (p viii) of the subject somewhat daunting.

In his bid to facilitate cross-fertilisation of thought, Silverman has faced enormous challenges in the need to craft his material into a form that will enable his complex ideas to be accessed by non-specialists. To present the wide range of ideas he covers, the book is organised into a preface and three parts. In the preface, I speak from my heart, Silverman outlines his approach to phonology and expresses a hope that the book will help students of phonology develop their critical skills, and that teachers of phonology will add it to their repertoire of sources for discussion.

Part 1, I speak with my mouth, explores three types of sound substitution – contrastive, neutralising and allophonic – with three examples of contrastive sound substitution (stops, nasals and vowel harmony) analysed in depth. Silverman describes how alphabetic representations of language cannot adequately express the true nature of linguistic sound systems, and suggests that it is the transitions between consonants and vowels that are ‘the most informationally rich and often the most auditorily prominent components of the speech signal’ (p 55). Interestingly, he characterises this as ‘old news’ (p 55), citing the observations of historic linguist luminaries such as Herman Paul (1880), Mikolaj Kruzewski (1883) and Jan Baudouin de Courtenay (1927).

Part 2, I speak my mind, examines neutralising and allophonic sound substitution in greater depth and with reference to a number of languages including Dutch, Korean and Hungarian. Variation and probability, and the tension between phonetics and phonology, are also discussed. Silverman argues that the allophonic patterns that occur today in all languages exist as a result of the adaptation of a contrastive value to its context. In other words, successful speech propagates.

Part 3, I speak therefore you are, discusses the concept of speakers’ intentions and the degree to which they are altruistic or selfish in the phonological choices they make. (For example, in adjusting their voice volume in a crowded room, are they aiming to help listeners hear, or are they more intent on ensuring that their messages are conveyed?). Part 3 concludes with a reiteration of some of the major points contained in earlier chapters. Many of these points could be used as discussion topics with advanced phonology students and they act as a strong and succinct restatement of Silverman’s perspective on phonology – that ‘both language itself and its structural characteristics are emergent consequences of our evolved status as social beings: I speak, therefore you are’ (p 219).

Each chapter within the three parts concludes with a summary of its content. The summaries, though dense, are very helpful in the case of a book that travels through some phonological terrain that has hitherto been comparatively uncharted. Silverman acknowledges his indebtedness to Darwin’s theory of natural selection, and to bodies of linguistic thought such as the Kazan School, the Prague School, the Generative School and American Structuralism (p ix), all of which have played a role in the development of his own position.

Whether Silverman succeeds in his aim of opening up phonology to members of other...
disciplines remains to be seen. However, it can be safely said that teachers of phonology and graduate students will find this book immensely stimulating and thought-provoking.

References


Language and cultures in contrast and comparison


Reviewed by Denise Gassner

*Languages and cultures in contrast and comparison* is a collection of articles on three main topics: information structure, lexis and second language (L2) acquisition. These topics are discussed by providing examples from different languages and drawing comparisons between them. In part one of this edited book, the way information is structured in a sentence in languages such as English, German, Spanish, Norwegian and Dutch is compared. In this first part, the distinction between theme, which is utterance initial information, and rhyme, which describes all or part of information in the rest of the utterance, is central. Part two investigates lexical features of English, Swedish, Norwegian, French, German, Akan, Italian and Spanish. In this part lexical matters are discussed such as, for instance, the expression of human emotions in different languages. Studies in part three of the book present research covering different topics in L2 acquisition from a contrastive perspective. Whereas the studies in the first two parts of the book introduce research on a great variety of languages, the research in this last part focuses on findings from native and non-native speakers of only three languages: Spanish, German and English.

The first study by Fetzer, in part one of the volume, compares theme zones in English and German in a systemic functional linguistic framework. In particular, the communicative act of non-acceptance in political interviews is investigated. Fetzer gives a detailed overview of the concept of theme and concludes by looking at theme as multiple themes that are composed of several elements (Halliday 1994; Gomez Gónzalez 2001). The different elements of the concept of multiple themes are topical theme, which expresses a semantic function; interpersonal theme, which expresses modal meaning; and textual theme, which expresses discourse cohesive functions (p 4). Fetzer states that the concept of theme is universal, whereas its linguistic realisation is not, as it follows different parameters in different languages. In