



Materials Review

Your Guide to French Pronunciation by Monique Bras. Larousse & Co., New York, 231 pages, \$8.95.

New material for teaching French pronunciation and phonetics is long overdue. Ms. Bras' guidebook is destined to be a godsend to undergraduate students faced with a one semester phonetics course often required for teacher certification. Since most undergraduate language students have not had a course in general linguistics, they approach the study of French phonetics with fear and trembling. The very mention of learning the IPA often causes a negative reaction towards the study of phonology, which then becomes an obstacle in the students' path rather than useful training. Ms. Bras' book may well be what is needed to help overcome this attitude, quite prevalent, in my opinion, among French majors.

Your Guide to French Pronunciation presents in English clear, precise explanations of phonetic theory along with audio-oral practice in French. Although the author points out the current changes and acceptable variations in Standard French, she emphasizes the essential aspects of French pronunciation so that the student does not get lost in subtleties. The *Guide* is divided into three parts which may be used simultaneously after the student has been introduced to an overview of articulation and classification of French sounds presented in Part One. The instructor will want to refer back to diagrams in the first part showing the articulation of each phoneme studied in Part Two. Each of the thirty-six learning units in the second part is divided into four basic sections: 1) the description, production and practice of each phoneme, 2) graded pronunciation exercises, 3) a very convenient chart showing relationships between sound and orthography and 4) exercises in audio-discrimination. This order does not have to be strictly followed. In fact, the instructor might prefer to do the audio practice in discrimination of sounds before going on to oral practice. After the student has become thoroughly acquainted with the phoneme in the four sections mentioned above, he is then referred by page number to Part Three, which is a workbook containing carefully prepared transcription exercises adapted to each learning unit.

The book has a number of features which make it a helpful guide to American students embarking upon the study of French pronunciation and phonetics. First of all, as mentioned above, the linguistic explanation is in English. Although many of the words are cognates, i.e. *phonème*, *morphème*, *bilabiale*, etc., most students have never studied the phonology of their own language, so these terms represent new concepts. In order to spend a minimum amount of time on theory and explanation, thus allowing a maximum amount of time for practice and correction, it is more efficient in a beginning course to have the text in English. After the basic phonological concepts and vocabulary are assimilated, the student can then make an easier transfer to the more detailed studies in French, such as those of Lton or Delattre.

Secondly, Bras consistently uses the International Phonetic Alphabet in her transcription of French sounds. This may seem to be a basic feature one might take for granted, unless he has used Valdman's *Drillbook of French Pronunciation*. I have always found it extremely annoying that Valdman et al. chose to use their own drillbook symbols. This use of alternate symbols adds to confusion in French spelling rather than allowing a smoother transition as the authors claim (one does find e and e in French orthography but never o, o or oe, oe). These symbols are of no value later on when the student checks the phonetic transcription of a word in any standard dictionary. The Valdman text uses still another set of symbols (e,o,oe, without accents) to represent sounds in free variation. Bras points out cases in which one finds free variation of certain vowels, but does not make a major case of it or create a special symbol. Students should be aware of the free variation of sounds, but when trying to improve their own pronunciation, their aim should be consistency in the use of whichever variant they choose. The simplicity of Bras' *Guide* is to be commended.

Another asset is the attention she brings to intonation from the very beginning of oral practice. (Valdman treats intonation separately in Chapters 13 and 28, not mentioning it in connection with drill sentences in each unit.) Intonation problems are among the most difficult to correct and should be dealt with immediately, not put off to be studied apart at a later time. Bras also marks liason by using small symbols slightly below the line indicating necessary, prohibited, or optional linking. She summarizes the three categories of liason in charts, arriving at this division "according to their use by cultivated French people in spontaneous conversation." Her guidelines, plus examples for each type, will help the confused student who thinks that liason is mostly a guessing game. The rather complex problem of the French phonème /e/, sometimes referred to as "mute e," is presented

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with equal clarity by the use of charts, one showing its pronunciation in isolated words, another showing it in rhythmic groups.

Since the *Guide* is aimed at English speakers, some example words could have been more carefully scrutinized. The heading for the first phoneme reads: 1. THE VOWEL /i/ AS IN *FIT*. Although the word *FIT* is printed in italics, it is difficult to distinguish it from the English 'fit,' a word often used to point out the English phoneme /I/, which one wants to avoid in French. It is a poor choice in French as well since it is a verb in the *passé simple*, a tense not used in conversation, thus unfamiliar to the ear. The author could simply have used the word *vie* for a better example.

The French phonème /ɛ/ is equated to the vowel phoneme found in 'get'. Theoretically this is correct; however, in practice many Americans say /gIt/. A better example in English would have been 'bet' which is never confused with 'bit'. Bras compares the French phoneme /i/ to the vowel in 'feel.' Again, this is a poor example since the /I/ tends to elongate the diphthong, which one must completely avoid in French. But such comparisons with English represent only a very minor part of the *Guide*, whose strong points certainly outweigh these weaknesses.