

Beverly Collins and Inger M. Mees: *The Real Professor Higgins: The Life and Career of Daniel Jones*. Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1999. xvi + 571 pp. ISBN 3-11-015124-3. Hardback DM 248.00, US\$ ± 124.00

This book is a monumental tribute to a not very great man. It is magnificently produced, with a cover design (by Christopher Schneider) that deserves a prize, and with a wealth of illustrations and photographs. Given the lists of contents, illustrations, and abbreviations, a foreword by John Wells (the present professor of phonetics at University College London), a preface and acknowledgements by the authors at the beginning, and a long appendix on the historical background of phonetics in Europe, specimens of examination papers, International Phonetic Alphabet charts, notes, a list of interviews, a chronological bibliography of Jones's works, a list of references, and an index at the end, the body of the book consists of about 450 pages of richly illustrated text, interlaced with interesting photographs, on the life and work of Daniel Jones, Britain's leading phonetician in the first half of the twentieth century.

The book takes the reader through Jones's family background, his birth in 1881, his early years, his university training, and on through his 42 years of service, from 1907 to 1949, at University College London (UCL), until his death in 1967. Jones was a Londoner. His family belonged to the lower section of the upper middle class (the household boasted four servants). His father was a well-to-do barrister, who wanted his son Daniel to follow in his footsteps. After a modest degree in mathematics at Cambridge, Daniel studied at the Bar in London, following his father's wish. However, while still at school, he developed a passion for languages. In 1898 he visited the Gouin School of Languages in London to improve

his French and start on Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish, and he spent the Christmas period of 1900 in Marburg, Germany, at the Institut Tilly to improve his German, concentrating all the time on pronunciation more than on other aspects of the languages concerned. The teaching in both institutes was of the highly progressive kind that was becoming popular in those years: direct learning by “immersion,” without any grammatical analysis, and with a more analytical emphasis only on pronunciation.

Due to a prolonged illness during the winter of 1904–1905, it was decided that he should spend the following winter in healthier France. There, he looked up Paul Passy, the famous phonetician of the Sorbonne, who lived in Bourg-la-Reine, in the countryside just outside Paris. Passy accepted him as a student and introduced him to the household of his brother-in-law Henri Motte, who lived in an adjacent property and took lodgers to supplement the meagre income he made out of his paintings. The lodgers had to be preferably students of French, phonetics, or art, lessons being provided *en famille*. Henri Motte, of course, taught art. His wife taught French and some phonetics. But the specialist for phonetics was a Danish governess to the nine Motte children, by the name of Sophie Lund (Jones employed her later as an assistant in his phonetics department at UCL). Jones lodged with the Motte family, and in 1911 he married Cyrille, one of the Motte daughters, who was subsequently likewise employed at the UCL phonetics department.

Passy was one of the main driving forces behind the new reform movement in the teaching of languages. In 1886 he founded the “fonètik títcerz’ asóciécon” for the improvement of the teaching of English as a foreign language. In 1889 the scope was widened and the name was changed into the more palatable “Association Phonétique des Professeurs de Langues Vivantes,” which was changed again in 1897 into “Association Phonétique Internationale” or “International Phonetic Association” (IPA). Jones was an ardent member, and later also an officer, of the IPA, which was a central element in his professional and private life.

In 1907 Jones was given a part-time lectureship at UCL, where he taught practical classes in French and English phonetics, a general class on phonetics, and, later, also experimental phonetics. His practical courses attracted numerous students, mainly teachers in London schools. In 1912 he set up the first phonetics laboratory in Britain, housed in cramped conditions in the UCL complex. Due to the success of his teaching (and to an attractive offer from Oxford, which he turned down), he was promoted to a readership in 1914. Full professorial status followed in 1921. He retired in 1949 but remained active until his death in 1967.

Apart from meticulous analyses of the courses and lectures he gave, a description of his work on the articulatory aspects of the vowels and of

his notion of functional sound unit or phoneme, the book tells us about his contacts with contemporary scholars, mainly Sweet, Passy, Tilly, Pitman, Firth, Abercrombie, Fry, Uldall, and Jespersen, with artists like Shaw and Bridges, and with his informants, students, and staff, providing special little portraits of many of these. In the process, the reader has an opportunity to take an occasional peek at British society as it appeared at the height of its imperial power.

The book describes Jones's bouts of ill health, which forced him to stop working sometimes for months on end. It describes his failure to realize a very ambitious project for a gigantic phonetics institute during the years immediately following World War I. It describes in detail Jones's part in the coming about of Bernard Shaw's 1916 play *Pygmalion*, showing convincingly (pp. 97–103) that the main character of the play, Professor Henry Higgins, was modelled partly on Henry Sweet and partly on Daniel Jones, who showed Shaw around his laboratory, but that both the plot and Higgins's character were largely of Shaw's own making. Interestingly, the section in question also shows some of the social background to the play: Shaw's naive belief that all the masses needed for their emancipation was an improved pronunciation of English, which would immediately give them access to those quarters of society where the fleshpots were. Jones himself probably sympathized with Shaw's drawing room socialism, yet he anxiously avoided any public association with the Shavian movement. It is a pity that this aspect of British society as well as Jones's reasons for avoiding a public commitment are only adumbrated and not elaborated at all in the book at hand.

An important element in Jones's life was his close association with theosophy, in particular with the teachings of Helena Blavatsky and Annie Besant, during the years between the great wars, although, again, he never committed himself to official membership. According to Collins and Mees (p. 308), he was probably drawn to theosophy by the Motte family's Danish governess Sophie Lund, who was a convinced theosophist. Although towards the end of his life he became disillusioned with theosophy, it served him throughout his life as a substitute not only for religion but also for any serious study of mental or cognitive phenomena.

The book is, on the whole, well researched and well documented. But it lacks muscle. What makes it bland and anodyne is its failure to touch on the bald reality of what moved Jones and what was going on in British society at the time, and the authors' partiality to their subject, Daniel Jones. They sing the praises of a man who was in fact hardly an outstanding figure and who owed his success more to favorable circumstances than to his own greatness. Though there are occasional, halfhearted admissions

to this effect, the overall tendency is to call on the reader to participate in the authors' admiration for the man.

In fact, however, Jones was a mediocre figure. He was certainly not a great intellectual, if by that is meant a person who has a grasp of general issues, who develops new ideas and is keen to subject these to careful analytical scrutiny and constant reexamination, who is open to argument and sharp intellectual debate and has a wide range of interests. Jones possessed none of these qualities. His interest was and remained limited to articulatory phonetics, applied to the improvement of pronunciation. He had no curiosity with regard to the wider aspects of language, least of all its theoretical foundations (p. 427). The little he says about other aspects of linguistics betrays a strong phonemic bias. On p. 218 of his 1950 book *The Phoneme*, he writes, "... it is the phonemic idea which forms the basis for the non-phonetic branches of linguistic science, i.e. semantics, morphology, grammar, etc." And to complete the picture, he goes on (p. 219), "Phonemes in fact lie at the root of everything that is required for enabling language learners to use the right words, to put the words into their various forms and to use the forms appropriately. In fact, all practical linguistic attainments may be said to depend ultimately on the theory of phonemes." Surprisingly, the authors present (pp. 387–388) these palpably absurd and incompetent views without any comment. Instead, they reassure the reader by saying that, "for Jones, everything had to have a practical bias: he had little use for theories which could not easily be applied, and no regard at all for any form of academic pretentiousness" (p. 452). This startling juxtaposition of pure theory with academic pretentiousness reveals a good deal about both Jones and his biographers.

The authors make mention of the dissatisfaction among some of Jones's staff, notably Abercrombie (p. 328) and Firth (p. 336), about the lack of theoretical interest in the department and the rather rigid framework of articulatory phonetics along Jones's restricted lines, but they defend Jones by rejecting, against all evidence, Abercrombie's (mild) criticisms. In fact, Jones's work in general phonetics was meticulous rather than imaginative or innovative, and not free from conceptual unclarity, as he failed to distinguish consistently between articulatory, physical (acoustic), and perceptual (auditory) aspects of speech sounds. Moreover, as the authors concede (pp. 191), his model for the production of the cardinal vowels, which was exclusively based on tongue position (p. 180), was definitely proved wrong during the 1920s but never replaced with an improved version.

Associating themselves with Jones's own perspective, the authors ascribe the falling out between Jones and Firth merely to Firth's offering

permanent positions, which Jones himself was unable to offer, to some of Jones's more able people around 1944, when Firth had been given a chair at SOAS (pp. 355–356). That the staff members concerned also actually preferred the academic company of Firth to that of Jones because of the latter's lack of theoretical interest and Firth's more innovative approach is only halfheartedly admitted at the very end of the book, on p. 453.

The most Jones achieved with regard to theory was his concept of the phoneme, which he came upon early on through his readings of Sweet (who did not use the term but did have the concept) and through his contacts with Passy and especially with Baudouin de Courtenay's students Lev Ščerba and Tytus Benni around 1912. However, unlike Baudouin de Courtenay, Jones declined to see the phoneme as a mental or cognitive unit triggered by sensory input and projected onto speech sounds. Rather, he insisted on a purely physical, that is, articulatory, basis for phonemic distinctions, even though he knew and admitted that this was insufficient for a coherent description. For the practical purposes of orthography and language teaching (Jones 1932: 24), he was prepared to define the phoneme as "a family of sounds in a given language, which are related in character and are such that no one of them ever occurs in the same surroundings as any other in words" (Jones 1932: 23), a definition he repeated literally in later publications throughout his life (p. 449). In fact, however, he considered the phoneme undefinable (p. 449) but rejected all attempts at further investigation.

Jones's disinclination to consider anything to do with mental or cognitive processes in his professional work fits in with the general diffidence regarding mental phenomena in academic theorizing that was current in the first half of the twentieth century and found its most explicit expression in American behaviorism (never mentioned in the book). Yet few went so far as to seek refuge, as Jones did, in theosophy as a substitute for the mental aspects of the phoneme. Again, this embarrassing aspect is only adumbrated (pp. 327–328, 387, 451) and, as far as possible, glossed over charitably, but not analyzed any further.

From a personal point of view, finally, Jones does not stand out as a particularly exciting or moving figure, but rather as just a very decent but ordinary man, with all the limitations and weaknesses typical of ordinary people, but without any of the excesses so often found in the great.

Only once did he fall victim to delusions of grandeur. Just after World War I, as has been said, he developed plans for a grandiose Institute of Phonetics (pp. 199–200, 259–266). Envious of the well-equipped phonetics laboratories at the universities of Grenoble and Hamburg (the latter he visited in 1914), he launched a major appeal, around 1920, for the establishment of a similar but much bigger institute as part of UCL.

Architects' drawings were made (pp. 261–263) for a huge building containing a theater seating six hundred, five large lecture rooms, twenty classrooms, seven laboratories, a “phonographic museum” for the storage of gramophone records with sound material from a vast variety of languages, a chart room, plenty of research rooms, etc. The whole would be headed by a ten-story tower housing a library of fifty thousand volumes. The finances should come mainly from business. In his report to the UCL senate (pp. 261–262), he stressed, not quite sincerely, the importance of “speech acoustics and speech psychology” and of “philological [i.e. linguistic] research,” but the main emphasis was on “teaching English people how to pronounce with accuracy all the most important foreign languages,” on “teaching foreigners how to pronounce English,” and above all on “the cause of education among the uneducated or only partially educated peoples of the Empire,” which would result in political and economic benefits in the way of enhanced trade relations. The latter, in particular, would ensure that “the expenditure of the Institute of Phonetics would be covered in a few years by the profits to the nation arising out of our closer commercial relations with the native peoples of Asia and Africa.” He also produced leaflets, in “language that the ordinary businessman will understand” (p. 265), meant to show how the Institute of Phonetics would help benefit trade and missionary work (another important factor in education, politics, and trade). In short, Shaw again, but in the garb of commerce.

The plan met with a lukewarm reception on the part of UCL and with no response at all from business circles. The reasons are not hard to find. UCL will have thought the project too commercial for a university institute, and also out of proportion. And high finance and government, one may safely surmise, were not at all keen on helping lower-class boys or girls, let alone Africans, Asians, or Eurasians, get snotty. They will have quickly seen through Jones's argument that “the expenditure of the Institute ... would be covered ... by the profits ... arising out of our closer commercial relations with the native peoples of Asia and Africa,” expecting no benefits at all, except to UCL, Jones himself, and his institute, as no doubt large numbers of people would pay for extramural tuition in proper pronunciation. As for themselves, any sharing of power, wealth, or status with inferior classes was seen as undesirable. An occasional shot of fresh blood was all right, but never a program of wholesale emancipation. Jones was naïve in the extreme in thinking that a project of this nature could possibly have a chance in the context of imperial Britain as it was then, with the more proletarian car industry (and the Nuffield munificence) still in its infancy and the trade unions, who despised Jones's type of drawing room socialism anyway, still a minor force. He paid for

his efforts with a severe mental and physical breakdown, which kept him inactive for almost a year.

Unfortunately, Collins and Mees make no effort at analyzing the social and political causes of Jones's failure. All they say is that "Jones seems to have been out of his depth in dealing with the non-academic world" (pp. 265–266). Beyond that they content themselves with commiserating with Jones on what is described essentially as a personal disappointment. This is typical of the book. Had the authors taken a wider view and had they been less afraid of touching the nerves, no matter how sensitive, of people and of society, they would have produced a more interesting work. As it is, the book is just a bit too prim and proper. Embarrassing facts are intimated, if at all, *sotto voce*, behind the back of the hand, but never gone into or analyzed.

The style of writing is on the whole of high quality, but, again, more than a little too bland. It goes over the top in the phrase, found on p. 136, "Coming as he had under the influence of Paul Passy, . . .," which, for a variety of reasons, is well worth both a grammatical and a stylistic analysis.

Like Jones himself, the authors are less than well informed on matters of phonological theory, obviously drawing their information largely from Jones's own writings. They closely follow Jones's account of the origin and use of the term *phoneme* as given in his 1950 book *The Phoneme* and in his pamphlet *The History and Meaning of the Term "Phoneme"* of 1957; this account, though truthful, is incomplete and biased in that it fails to grasp the essence of the Prague School discussions of the phoneme and is woefully inadequate on the American structuralist developments in phonological theory. The same goes for the account provided by Collins and Mees, who claim that "the [American] Structuralists first took over his [i.e. Jones's] views, incorporated them, developed them and then proclaimed them as their own" (p. 453), which contrasts strangely with p. 389, where they speak of "the lack of American structuralist awareness of either Jones's own role in propagating the phoneme concept, or the primacy of the British school in the 1920s in pioneering the phonemic approach."

Although Jones no doubt regularly used the term *phoneme* in his own department from, say, 1918 onward, the corresponding concept was not investigated in any depth. Notably, Jones took no part in the discussions about the CONCEPT of phoneme that went on in Continental Europe and in America from 1925 on. Jones's group was inward-looking and, in fact, quite isolated from the rest of the linguistic world, which also took no more than a cursory interest in what was going on at the UCL phonetics department. At the very end of the historical Appendix at the end of the

book, on pp. 479–482, the authors describe the early development of phonology from Baudouin de Courtenay onward to Trubetzkoy and Jakobson but fail to mention the fact that Jones played no part at all in that arena. The American developments in phonology are not mentioned in the Appendix, and elsewhere only cursorily, and that in a totally inadequate way, in one paragraph on p. 453.

Did the early American phonologists appropriate Jones's notion of the phoneme, and did they neglect to thank him, as is said on p. 453 of the book under review? This question deserves some scrutiny, the more so since the biographers neglected to back up their statement with evidence.

The phonemic principle made its first appearance in America in Sapir's article "Sound patterns in language" in the first issue of *Language* of 1925. In this article, the term *phoneme* does not occur, but the notion is there. The notion is both psychological and structuralist. Sapir appeals both to native speakers' phonological intuitions and to "the inner configuration of the sound system of a language, the intuitive 'placing' of the sounds with reference to one another," whereby he draws an analogy with steps in a dance: a step cannot be a dance step unless "it can be 'placed' with reference to other movements that help to define the dance." Sapir also has the notion of complementary distribution of allophones, which he calls *conditional variants*. Clearly, there can be no suggestion that Sapir's ideas were even remotely influenced by Daniel Jones.

A year later Bloomfield published "A set of postulates for the science of language" in *Language* of 1926. Here, the term *phoneme* does occur, but it is defined in a way that bears no resemblance at all to Sapir's concept, even though Bloomfield refers to Sapir's article of the previous year. Bloomfield finds the phoneme by breaking down morphemes into constituent elements: "A minimum same of vocal features is a *phoneme* or *distinctive sound*." Allophones are unknown to him at this stage: "Ordinary phonetics can go no farther than this; phonetics which goes farther is either a personal skill or a science for the laboratory." He mentions as his sources Baudouin de Courtenay's major work on phonology of 1895 and Boas's Introduction to the *Handbook of American Indian Languages* of 1911, which contains no phonology at all (Boas never considered the phoneme).

In chapter five, "The phoneme," of Bloomfield's book *Language* of 1933, the phoneme is defined as a bundle of distinctive features (1933: 79), and the native speaker's identification of phonemic units is accounted for by the axiomatic assumption that "in every speech-community some utterances are alike in form and meaning" (1933: 78). The formal "alike-ness" is attributed to semantic factors, whose study, according to Bloomfield, has to await further scientific progress. Failing that, the lin-



guist has to trust the axiomatic assumption just mentioned. Jones is mentioned, along with Ellis, Sweet, and Passy, in connection with the IPA phonetic alphabet, which Bloomfield adopts. Bloomfield's bibliography lists Jones (1909, 1917, 1922); none of these works uses either the term or the concept of phoneme. So far, no trace of Jones, beyond his contribution to the IPA alphabet.

Next comes Swadesh's 1934 article "The phonemic principle." For Swadesh, who was a student of Sapir, "Phonemes are perceptive units in the sense that the native can recognize as different, words different as to one of the component phonemes." Allophones are called *positional variants*, and they are in *complementary distribution* (1934: 123). "Positional variants are unlike phonemes in that to substitute one positional variant for the other distorts the word, sometimes beyond recognition, but never changes it into another native word." He cites Jones (1931) among his sources, but there is no indication at all that he took over any of Jones's views.

Chao (1934) defends, in principle, a nonrealist, instrumentalist concept of phonology, which allows for different phonological accounts of phonetic data. He reviews the existing phoneme theories of his day and gives pride of place to a definition that he attributes to Palmer (1930), but which is in fact literally taken from Trofimov and Jones (1923: 49) and repeated in Jones (1931): "A phoneme is a group of sounds consisting of an important sound of the language (i.e. the most frequently used member of that group) together with others which take its place in particular sound-groups." He finds this definition more palatable than Jones's (1932) definition given above and proceeds to define his own notion as follows:

A phoneme is one of an exhaustive list of classes of sounds in a language, such that every word in the language can be given as an ordered series of one or more of these classes and such that two different words which are not considered as having the same pronunciation differ in the order or in the constituency of the classes which make up the word.

(One notes that Chao begs the question of what accounts for phonemic units by taking for granted that words are "considered" to have the same or different pronunciations.) So here we do have Jones, albeit with a phoneme definition he no longer considered adequate from 1932 on. Jones, obviously, never went into the question of realism versus instrumentalism.

The most influential publication in early American phonology, however, is Twaddell (1935). Twaddell begins by analyzing both the psychological and the physical notions of phoneme, rejecting the former as

uninvestigable. Among the physical notions of the phoneme he sets off, in main outline, Bloomfield's 1933 notion against Jones's standard definition of 1932, discussing both in exemplary detail. He concludes that both concepts are inadequate. As regards Jones, he says, "If Jones's definition of the phoneme (and variphone) appears inadequate as a theoretical basis for the study of phonetic relations within a language, it is probably because he had no such aim in view," putting his finger politely but precisely on Jones's weakest spot. Twaddell's own solution, prepared by Chao (1934), amounts to a rejection of realism in considering structural language units like the phoneme. He resorts to a version of instrumentalism, considering phonemes and other units "fictions" that turn out to be useful in a description of phonetic facts. We may consider Twaddell's important theoretical contribution to be the real starting point of American structuralist phonology. And it is based on a careful and sympathetic consideration of ALL contributions that had been made at the time, including Jones's.

I think any fair observer will have to conclude that Jones was not the main influence in early American phonology, and also that he was not treated improperly or unfairly by his American colleagues. Instead, it was Jones who was unresponsive and who never took part in any serious discussion on theoretical issues. The authors' failure to point this out and their uncritical assumption that Jones was right in his antagonism with respect to, in particular, the American linguists make the book less valuable than it would otherwise have been.

Even so, however, it is a book one will enjoy reading and consulting. It should be in all linguistic libraries, and also on the shelves of those linguists who can afford its price. As has been said, it is excellently produced, even if there are, inevitably, some minor flaws. It seems, for example, that the texts of the last seven notes of chapter 10 have mysteriously disappeared from the section "Notes" on p. 507. Also, I have been unable to locate the references to the notes 3, 4, and 7 in the text of chapter 8. As far as I have been able to ascertain, the book is never disfigured by misprints. The only misprint I found does the opposite of disfiguring: on p. 21 the name of Passy's first society for teachers of English is given as "fonètik títcerz' asóciécon", whereas it was "fonètik títcerz' asóciécon." And, since I am being fussy, the names of persons in the index are sometimes given with just the initials and sometimes with full first names. None of that, however, can detract from the value of the book as a whole.

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