

Interviewing Swedes about phonetic transcriptions

Michaël Stenberg

Centre for Languages and Literature (Phonetics), Lund University, Lund, Sweden

Abstract

The present paper reports on an ongoing series of in-depth interviews with Swedes about phonetic transcriptions. These interviews form an important part of a doctoral thesis on phonetic transcriptions (e.g. IPA) in encyclopaedias in Swedish language. For context and comparison reasons, the thesis also treats other publications featuring phonetic transcriptions, such as textbooks, dictionaries and wine catalogues. People who professionally speak in public are interviewed in detail about their behaviour when seeking information on pronunciation of difficult items, typically proper names or words of foreign origin. They are also asked to make assessments of a number of existing transcription systems with respect to rendering of stress, segments and prosodic features. Among the interviewees are lecturers, actors and broadcasters. Preliminary results show that users of encyclopaedias rarely consult the pronunciation key when trying to interpret transcriptions. As to the issue of whether words from all languages should be transcribed with equal accuracy, in the first instance the interviewees are apt to be in favour of that proposal, but often modify their standpoint when pondering the matter. Furthermore, for encyclopaedia entries regarding human beings, a vast majority want phonetic transcriptions to be supplied not only for surnames—as is the conventional usage in Sweden—but also for first names; these have come more and more into use, and not necessarily for disambiguation reasons.

Introduction

You may write an entire book, be it a novel or a doctoral dissertation, without bothering about the pronunciation of any word in it. But someone reading a novel aloud, or presenting a paper at a conference will have to make a choice—consciously or unconsciously—of how to pronounce every detail in it. Likewise, a playwright or a poet, already when conceiving a work, will have to consider what the final result will sound like when performed.

In Sweden, encyclopaedias form an important source of information on pronunciation, particularly of names and words of foreign origin. Adequate pronunciation of these is considered a mark of prestige. There is a long-standing tradition of encyclopaedias to provide users with phonetic transcriptions, at least of entry headwords. In addition, from the late 19th century (Lyttkens & Wulff, 1889) until the 1990s (Hedelin, 1997), no dedicated pronunciation dictionaries for Swedish were published. Hitherto, there has been a lack of knowledge about users' behaviour when seeking pronunciation information. Likewise, little is known about their attitudes and preferences regarding such information, be it in the shape of phonetic transcriptions or clickable audio pronunciations. A pilot study, a quantitative survey, presented by me at *Fonetik 2009* (Stockholm University), yielded shallow results. I decided that applying a qualitative method would probably prove more fruitful. The present paper reports on an ongoing series of in-depth interviews with professionals likely to request reliable information about pronunciation in order to fulfil their tasks in the best way possible. The interviews make up an important part of my dissertation work entitled *Phonetic transcriptions in encyclopaedias in Swedish*.

Background

Swedish encyclopaedias have been using phonetic transcriptions for more than 130 years. Still, little is known about the reception of this pronunciation advice among users. Also, editorial boards seem to start from scratch when preparing for a new work, each of them thus inventing a transcription system of their own, without much regard to previous or surrounding ones. The resulting manifold systems may be confusing for the reference library user, even if IPA-based transcriptions have become increasingly used, and dominate since the 1970s.

Method

One of the main objectives of my dissertation work is to investigate how users of

encyclopaedias act when in need of pronunciation advice, to find out their wishes about it and to study their attitudes to various existing transcription systems. Carrying out a survey based on a random sample of 1000 individuals and then treating the data statistically would make no sense. Therefore, I decided to conduct a series of in-depth interviews of about 45 minutes each with around 20 persons who in their profession are carefully listened to. Consequently, they ought to care about their pronunciation and seek reliable information when in doubt. My interview method is based on the guidelines in the Norwegian–Danish handbook *Den kvalitative forskningsintervjun* (Swedish translation) (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Subjects and issues

The interviewees are recruited from the following groups of professionals:

- (a) broadcast media journalists;
- (b) university lecturers;
- (c) commercial event lecturers;
- (d) librarians in touch with customers;
- (e) film and theatre directors and actors, including radio theatre;
- (f) musical drama directors and singers;
- (g) narrators of radio novels or audiobooks.

Initially, the interviewees are asked to tell something about their background: their knowledge of foreign languages, studies in phonetics, if any, etc. Then an informal conversation follows, where topics are discussed in an associative order. The idealized questions I want to get answered are of three types:

Issues on attitudes

- How important do you think it is to pronounce according to current norms?
- To what degree do you trust the data on pronunciation you have found?
- What is your opinion on the phonetic transcriptions you have met?
- What do you think of clickable sound recordings of phonetic transcriptions?
- Could such recordings be substituted for phonetic transcriptions?

- In what way could phonetic transcriptions be improved?
- How should stress advice be marked in normal orthography (e.g. in entry headwords)? (Printed examples are shown.)
- What kind of phonetic transcription (marking of stress included) do you prefer for some given words? (Printed examples are shown.)

Issues on use of pronunciation advice

- What are your reasons for seeking pronunciation advice?
- Where do you turn to do so?
- In what concrete situation (where and when) do you do so?
- Exactly how do you proceed when searching for information about pronunciation?
- How do you memorize the pronunciation you have found?
- Do you use the keys, i.e. the explanations of the signs used?

Issues on principles

- Should information about pronunciation in encyclopaedias be *descriptive, normative or guiding*?
- How should the meaning of signs be explained (specimen words from various languages, verbal articulation descriptions, images illustrating articulation)?
- For human beings, is it sufficient to supply pronunciation of surnames?
- On what variety of Swedish should the pronunciation information be based? (How to render <rs>, <rd> etc.?)
- Ought pronunciation of all languages to be treated with the same accuracy? If not, what criteria should decide?
- Should more than one pronunciation variety (depending on geographical origin) be used for certain languages (English, Spanish, Portuguese, etc.)?
- Should features like Swedish and Norwegian *accent 1* and *2*, or Danish *stød* be rendered?
- Should tones in for example Chinese be rendered?

Procedure

The interviews are recorded on a Roland Edirol R-09HR solid state audio recorder with two built-in omnidirectional electret microphones. The recording mode applied is MP3, 128 kbps at 44.1 kHz sampling frequency (allowing a recording time of 490 min on an SD card of 512 MB capacity). When finished, the recordings are transferred to a PC via High-speed USB 2.0 for storage and playback in Windows Media Player.

In order to facilitate for interviewees to compare and evaluate various transcription systems, I use a display book with transparent pockets, in which I have put white sheets of paper in DIN A4 size, so that they can be shown one by one at a reading distance of about 50 cm.

On one sheet, five different systems for marking stress in normal orthography are shown, either as entry headwords or alternative varieties of those, such as scientific names of species. Each of the systems is represented by three tokens of varying length. Typeface is Times New Roman boldface in 24 point.

The remaining sheets contain examples of several kinds of phonetic transcriptions to be evaluated by the interviewees, in a process similar to that of determining a prescription for eyeglasses. Gentium Plus normal in 36 point is used as default typeface.

The examples feature transcription systems from the following works:

- Bonniers Lexikon (Swedish encyclopaedia)
- Bra Böckers Lexikon (Swedish encyclopaedia)
- Den Store Danske Encyklopædi (Danish encyclopaedia)
- Duden Aussprachewörterbuch (German pronunciation dictionary)
- Nationalencyklopedin (Swedish encyclopaedia)
- Nordisk Familjebok, 2nd edn. (Swedish encyclopaedia)
- Nordisk Familjebok, 4th edn. (Swedish encyclopaedia)
- Respons (Swedish encyclopaedia)
- Svensk uppslagsbok, 2nd edn. (Swedish encyclopaedia) and Svenska Akademiens ordlista, 13th edn. (Dictionary of the Swedish Academy)

- Wells, Longman Pronunciation Dictionary, 3rd edn.
- Wikipedia German-language edition.

Processing of interviews

Shortly after each interview, I write down a résumé to be completed when listening to the recording. I also make notes about the attitude of the interviewee (interested, careful, energetic, etc.). Later, when listening to the recording in detail, I transcribe important passages (providing answers to my idealized questions or containing remarkable or unexpected comments). The highlights of the text thus created constitute the base of my further writing.

Results

Preliminary results show that encyclopaedia users seldom consult the pronunciation key before trying to interpret the phonetic transcriptions. When asked if transcriptions of words from all languages of the world should be equally accurate, their spontaneous answer tend to be yes, but when pondering the matter and becoming aware of disregarded problems, they often change their opinion. For encyclopaedia entries regarding human beings, there is an almost unanimous agreement that phonetic transcriptions should be supplied not only for surnames—as is the conventional usage in Sweden—but also for first names; these have come more and more into use, and not necessarily for disambiguation reasons.

Further research

Much work is left to be done; about half of the planned interviews are pending. When complete, their outcome will hopefully make it possible to give recommendations for designing phonetic transcription systems suitable for different kinds of encyclopaedias and other reference books or corresponding internet sites.

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