



DAVID ABERCROMBIE

## David Abercrombie 1909–1992

DAVID ABERCROMBIE was *the* British phonetician following Daniel Jones in the second half of the twentieth century. He redefined the subject, creating general phonetics as a university discipline that had not previously existed. But by the time of his death on 4 July 1992, new technology and a world with different needs had led to yet another change in the nature of the field.

Abercrombie was born on 19 December 1909 into an idyllic Edwardian world. His father was the poet Lascelles Abercrombie, who came from a large, prosperous Manchester family. For most of his first five years David Abercrombie lived in Ryton, a tiny hamlet in Gloucestershire. The American poet Robert Frost shared the house for part of that time, and the well known war poet Rupert Brooke was a visitor. Abercrombie particularly liked Brooke because he treated him like an adult.

When the First World War came, the family moved to Liverpool, where Lascelles Abercrombie, who was unfit for military service, became an inspector of munitions. They stayed in Liverpool until 1922, as after the war Lascelles Abercrombie became a Lecturer in Poetry at Liverpool University. David Abercrombie was sent to school at Liverpool College, suffering from the bullies of the time. When his father was appointed Professor of English Literature at the University of Leeds he was transferred to Leeds Grammar School. He went on to the university and received a Third Class Honours BA in English from Leeds in 1930. That was the highest formal academic level he ever

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achieved, perhaps explaining why he, an interesting, innovative, meticulous scholar of the highest level in his own right, never set much store on academic credentials.

He originally intended to continue his studies by taking an MA in English Language, writing a thesis on i-mutation, but a meeting with the dominant phonetician of the time, Professor Daniel Jones of University College, London, led to a change of plans. Jones cast his spell and Abercrombie became a student in his department. In order to understand Abercrombie's later contribution to the field of phonetics, it is necessary to understand the status of phonetics in 1930. Daniel Jones was at the height of his power. Over the preceding quarter of a century he had built up a remarkable department, instilling in his junior colleagues great ability in the production and perception of a wide range of sounds. They were skilled teachers of the pronunciation of many of the world's major languages. But the emphasis was on the individual languages and their sounds, and not on the nature of spoken language as a whole.

Abercrombie's colleagues at University College included J. R. Firth (who went on to become Britain's first Professor of General Linguistics), Ida Ward (who became Professor of West African Languages), H  l  ne Coustenoble (a notable French scholar who helped Abercrombie acquire his impeccable French pronunciation), and Stephen Jones, who was in charge of the UC phonetics laboratory and showed him the value of instrumental records of speech. All these and others, such as Bronislaw Malinowski, the anthropologist at the London School of Economics (where Abercrombie taught English as a Second Language and French from 1934 to 1938), and C. K. Ogden, the philosopher and inventor of Basic English, had a great influence on him. But none of these scholars, including Daniel Jones, shared his vision of phonetics as a basic university subject.

During World War II Abercrombie developed his view of the nature of phonetics. In 1939 when war broke out he had been teaching for a year at the British Council Institute at Athens. Others on the staff there included the phoneticians Ian Catford and Elizabeth Uldall, and the novelist Lawrence Durrell, whom Abercrombie recruited to teach Basic English. The German invasion of Greece in 1940 pushed the British first into Cyprus, and then into Egypt, where Abercrombie was employed in various government activities, as well as being a lecturer at the University of Cairo. He met Mary Marble, an American journalist who was working for the Office of Strategic Services, the forerunner of the Central Intelligence Agency, in 1943. Through his own official duties

he had access to the British dossier on her, which must have been to his satisfaction, as they were married in 1944. At the end of the war, worrying, as he told his new wife, that he had no market value, he returned to England. Fortunately he found that he was able to take up his former position at the London School of Economics.

In 1947 Abercrombie was appointed as a Lecturer in Phonetics in the Department of English (his and his father's old department) at the University of Leeds. This took him closer to the ambition he had been nurturing to teach phonetics as a general university subject, but it was still not what he had planned. In 1948, when Edinburgh University invited him to start a Phonetics Department, he jumped at the chance. The following year saw the first year-long course in phonetics, attended by his wife and members of staff. The only regular student was his step-daughter, who was just beginning her first year at university.

From then on phonetics flourished at Edinburgh. Elizabeth Uldall had already joined the staff as a lecturer in 1949, and others soon followed. (The present writer was an Assistant Lecturer, later Lecturer, from 1953 to 1961.) By 1965, at its peak, the department had a staff of twelve, including three who went on to become well known professors (Gillian Brown first at Essex, now at Cambridge, Klaus Kohler at Kiel, and John Laver, who now holds a personal Chair at Edinburgh), as well as Walter Lawrence, the retired designer of the first parametric speech synthesizer, PAT. In 1964 Abercrombie was appointed to a personal Chair in Phonetics; this became an established Chair in 1967, just before the Department of Phonetics was amalgamated with the Department of General Linguistics, and then the School of Applied Linguistics, to form the Department of Linguistics. He retired in 1980, but continued to be active in the field. He was elected to the British Academy in 1991.

What was Abercrombie's view of phonetics as embodied in his Ordinary Course (the Edinburgh term for a year-long general introductory course in a subject)? It began, not surprisingly, with an account of the speech production mechanism. But it was a much more complete account of human phonetic capabilities than had been heretofore available for beginning students. Early on, students were introduced to the possibilities of different airstream mechanisms, as Abercrombie was well aware of the interest stimulated by discussions of clicks and ejectives. At the same time as this account of the set of possible speech sounds was being developed, students were introduced to phonetic transcription, gradually becoming experts in transcribing their own

and others' speech. Abercrombie was the first person to make clear that there were many factors underlying the distinction between a broad and a narrow transcription. He pointed out that one transcription could be narrower than another because it used more specific symbols, such as **ɹ** instead of **r**, or symbols with diacritics such as **ɖ̥** instead of **d**. Alternatively it could be narrower in quite a different way, namely in that it used a greater number of symbols, distinguishing allophones such as English initial **t<sup>h</sup>** and final **ʔt**.

Abercrombie's Ordinary Course introduced students to the sounds of a wide range of languages and many different accents of English, with Scottish English and Scots dialects being given a prominent place. Abercrombie was far from an advocate of his own upper-class English accent, received pronunciation (RP), as the most important form of English pronunciation. His egalitarian views on accents of English were no doubt shaped by teaching in Scotland, having an American wife and step-children, and his own non-élitist politics.

The Ordinary Course also included lectures on instrumental phonetic techniques and acoustic phonetics, usually given by other members of his staff. Abercrombie saw the necessity for students to have some laboratory experience to round out their phonetic studies. He also stressed the importance of students becoming practically adept phoneticians, and not just experts in the theory of phonetic description. Ear training and performance exercises were an important part of the courses that he taught, often occupying forty per cent of the teaching time (two out of the five teaching hours a week).

Abercrombie never wrote a book corresponding to the full Ordinary Course. His introductory book, *Elements of General Phonetics* should perhaps have been titled 'Topics in General Phonetics', as it leaves out much that he considered to be at the core of the subject. The book begins with one of his major contributions to linguistic thought, the clear distinction between a language and the medium for expressing that language. A language is a system of rules for organising abstract lexical items into sentences. The medium, which can take several different forms, is the method for conveying messages in that system. The medium may be the physical sounds that phonetics describes, or the letters and devices used in written communications, or the bumps of Braille, or the waving of semaphore flags. Abercrombie points out that the medium, be it sounds or written letters or anything else, is an artefact created by humans. As such, as well as conveying linguistic information, it conveys something about whoever produced it. It does

this by what Abercrombie (following the philosopher Charles S. Peirce) calls indexical features. Thus speech provides an index of the group to which the speaker belongs, a mark of the personal characteristics of the individual, and information on the speaker's physical or mental states such as excitement or drunkenness. The medium also has aesthetic properties which come to the fore in poetry (a natural interest of Abercrombie's), advertising slogans, and songs.

The main part of the book following this introductory material is an account of the mechanisms involved in the production of speech. What Abercrombie has to say on this topic is now commonplace, but when it appeared it incorporated many points, such as the nature of stress and an account of the possible airstream mechanisms, which had previously been available only in technical publications. There are also good accounts of basic topics such as the structure of syllables, phoneme theory and assimilation. It does all this in the most clear and simple way possible. Abercrombie took immense pains with his writing. He made sure that each thought followed logically, and was clearly expressed. Irrelevant points were cut out and difficult expressions simplified. As he once said to me, 'It is often difficult to get each sentence exactly right, but it is worth spending hours trying to do so.'

Some of the limitations of *Elements of General Phonetics* are due to its incomplete coverage of the field, but others can be ascribed to Abercrombie's aesthetic susceptibilities. In the Foreword he wrote: 'I hope that I have been able to show that it is possible to present the subject, or at least its elements, without disfiguring the text with the somewhat repulsive diagrams of the vocal organs and the exotic phonetic symbols which, for the general reader, are apt to make it seem unattractive.'

It is probably not feasible to do this. Not only are diagrams essential to show movements of the vocal organs that would need a thousand words to describe, but also phonetic symbols, some of them somewhat exotic, are at the heart of work in the field, and the text would have been more helpful in leading students on to further study if it had included more phonetic transcription.

Abercrombie's views on proper publication also had unfortunate results on another occasion. He was delighted when he heard from a friend of his on the editorial board that his book, *English Phonetic Texts* (1964) had been accepted for publication by Faber and Faber, notable publishers of poets such as T. S. Eliot. But as a result an important book never became widely available to the phonetic community. Faber and

Faber published an edition of only 1,000 copies, and had no real interest in promoting a book so different from the stock-in-trade of their regular list. So the careful exegesis and exemplification of different types of transcription, a subject on which Abercrombie was probably the world's leading authority, has taken much longer to have its full impact.

In addition to his wide knowledge of the theory and practice of different styles of phonetic transcription, Abercrombie was the foremost authority on the history of phonetics. One could ask him about almost any technical term in phonetics and he could tell you when it was first used and what its original meaning was. His paper on Isaac Pitman (1937) and his communication to the Philological Society on 'Forgotten Phoneticians' (1949) were early work in this area. Throughout his career he taught courses discussing the works of the nineteenth-century phoneticians, Bell, Ellis, and Sweet. At the time of his death he was still working on his study of the English phonetician William Holder, whose *Elements of Speech* was published in 1669. (This study has now been put into publishable form by his former student and colleague, Alan Kemp.)

The other main area of Abercrombie's research was the study of prosody and rhythm. Sometimes he was able to combine this with his historical interests, as in his paper on 'Steele, Monboddoo and Garrick', in which he describes Garrick's performance of the soliloquy 'To be or not to be' in an eighteenth-century production of *Hamlet*, based on an early publication by Joshua Steele. At other times his work in this area reflected his long-standing interest in poetry, as in his 'A Phonetician's View of Verse Structure' (1967), or his concern with the contribution of phonetics to the teaching of English as a foreign language, as in his paper on 'Syllable Quantity and Enclitics' (1964). He was not a believer in the strict isochronicity of stressed syllables in English as might be evidenced (but is not) in laboratory records; but he showed very nicely how 'silent stresses', which he wrote with a stress mark in parentheses ('), might occur to maintain the rhythm, as at the ends of the first, second and last lines in a limerick:

An 'elderly 'lady from 'Ryde (')  
 Ate 'too many 'apples and 'died. (')  
 The 'apples fer'mented  
 In'side the la'mented  
 Making 'cider in'side her in'side. (')

Abercrombie did not do much work in the phonetics laboratory himself, although he was always very encouraging of the endeavours

of others, even being a subject in a number of experiments. He wrote a paper on palatography (1957), and another on speech synthesis in parametric terms (1969). These and other valuable contributions are included in his two collections of papers, *Studies in Phonetics and Linguistics* (1965) and *Fifty Years in Phonetics* (1991). The latter book includes an essay with the same title as the book, which is in itself an excellent appraisal of his work.

Abercrombie had an extraordinarily wide range of interests, encompassing virtually anything related to speech and much related to the other principal medium of language, writing. He never lost his interest in Basic English, welcoming its approval by the War Cabinet in 1943. He also conducted a lengthy correspondence with Sir James Pitman concerning the parliamentary debates on Simplified Spelling. His interests in these topics were, however, more those of a scholar rather than an advocate.

His outside interests included wine, malt whisky and cricket. His students became educated in many of the different tastes of France and Scotland, as well as in phonetics. He kept a diary for part of his life, but seldom recorded much beyond appointments and incidental facts such as 'Cricket vs. Streatham. Took 4 wickets' (31 May 1937), and 'played cricket against Cyprus garrison' (11 May 1940).

Abercrombie retired in 1980, and, after an abortive attempt to fill his Chair, two of the three subject heads in the Department of Linguistics decided that filling the established Chair in Phonetics was not a departmental priority. Although this was probably not in their minds, in doing so they were reflecting the fact that Abercrombie's definition of the field of phonetics was becoming less appropriate. The reasons for studying speech differ from generation to generation. In Abercrombie's hey-day phonetics was important in a variety of ways. Abercrombie saw speech as the primary means of conveying linguistic information ('the medium of spoken language' as he would say), and also as a source of socio-linguistic information ('indexical behaviour' in his terminology) and personal data ('idiosyncratic information'). He was also concerned with the relation between speech and poetry, speech and writing, and speech as a window into the mind. In his view, phonetics should be of interest to anyone with a natural curiosity about life.

Times have now changed, and although many of these aspects of speech are still of concern, our motives for studying them are somewhat different. Since the advent of Chomsky, who is clearly one of the most powerful thinkers of the second half of this century, it is language, not



speech, that is the most fashionable object of study, and syntax, rather than phonology, is generally seen as the central core of language. The grammar of a language includes its phonology and how the sounds are related to phonetic substance, as well as its semantics and how utterances are related to observable meanings, but the study of language has at its heart the morphology of words and the syntax of sentences. Phonetics is thus now seen by linguists as on the periphery of general linguistics.

We must also note that the kind of phonetics that Abercrombie taught is no longer the centre-piece of many university departments because it is no longer the centre of so much research activity. There is still much to be learned about sounds and sound systems, but, largely due to the organisation of phonetic knowledge by Abercrombie and people like him, the bases of phonetics are quite clear. The same is not true of syntax, where ongoing research is continually leading to new ways of looking at the fundamental premises of the field. A textbook such as Abercrombie's *Elements of General Phonetics* (1967) can still stand as a valid account of much of the subject, something which is not true of any elementary textbook on syntax written nearly thirty years ago.

The study of other phonetic topics, such as the role of speech in conveying socio-linguistic and personal information, have not diminished in importance, but they have also changed in many ways. Nowadays we are less concerned with the acquisition of certain accents, such as a native French pronunciation, and more concerned with straightforward description of different accents so that our speech recognition machines can handle them. This kind of work is very much in the spirit of Abercrombie's teaching, and his contributions in this area are still important. He described many aspects of Scottish English and other dialects that had not been previously observed. His thinking on the idiosyncratic aspects of speech is also significant. His publications include valuable discussions of voice quality and the contribution of the other strands of speech that contribute to the individual characteristics of a person's voice.

The fact remains, however, that nowadays there are fewer departments teaching anything like the Ordinary Course in Phonetics. It is interesting to consider what Abercrombie might have done now, if he were once again a young person asked to start a Department of Phonetics. He would probably place the same emphasis on distinguishing between language and medium. He would also require phoneticians to

be skilled performers in the tradition of Bell, Sweet and Jones, which he followed. He would have looked askance at events at a recent scientific meeting (the XIVth International Congress of Phonetic Sciences), where it transpired that several leading participants were unable to produce clicks and ejectives in words. We can speculate on what he would have thought about the new emphasis on Communication Engineering. He was always eager to keep up with the latest technical advances, acquiring in 1950 one of the first Kay sound spectrographs outside the United States for his department. When, in 1953, he heard about speech synthesized by Walter Lawrence on the Parametric Artificial Talker (PAT), he enthusiastically endorsed the idea of research in this field at Edinburgh. Nobody else in the Faculty of Arts at that time had government funding. Abercrombie led the way in securing for his department a contract for basic scientific research. In his later years he felt that the subject of phonetics in the form in which he had helped to establish it was somewhat threatened by the rapid technical advances and government research funds that led to the establishment of a very large Centre for Speech Technology Research at Edinburgh, which he viewed as swallowing up his former department. But if he had been a young person in charge, starting again, he might well have realised that that was the way of the future.

What is also certain is that he would have created a department in which there was a great deal of *esprit de corps*. Abercrombie was a remarkable leader, inspiring others to do their best. He was always willing to discuss current research or teaching problems, and to offer shrewd advice, making his department a happy place for staff and students alike. He enjoyed company, and, along with his wife Mary, welcomed visitors. At their ever-open house he would gently express concern with all aspects of the lives of his associates, while Mary merrily offered her own wisdom, and softly kept him in check. Their sherry parties, on the first Sunday of every month, were known world-wide.

Finally, on a personal note, I must acknowledge my great indebtedness to him. I always felt honoured when people referred to me as his pupil, but it was not until after I had finished writing my own textbook (Ladefoged 1975, 1993) that I fully realised how much I owed to him. As I wrote in the Preface, 'My greatest debt is to David Abercrombie, from whom I first learned what I took to be the commonly accepted dogma of phonetics; only later did I discover that many of the ideas were his own contribution to the field.' But my debts go far beyond the

merely intellectual knowledge he bestowed on me. I was very lucky to have him as a teacher and a friend.

Abercrombie was a teacher who never made one feel as stupid as one often was. Only a year before his death I went to visit him and found him sitting surrounded by his books. 'Have you read this?' he asked, 'Or this, you really must.' 'No, David,' I replied, feeling about forty years younger and realising how ignorant I was. But, as in those earlier days, I got the books he recommended, and went on learning from him. I still think over things he told me, and realise that I will always be his student. He organised the subject for his time, and earned his own place in the history of phonetics.

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*Note.* I am indebted for much helpful information to Mary Abercrombie, Mary Brown, John Laver and Elizabeth Uldall.

## References

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