
Alfred Charles GIMSON

born 7 June 1917, London

died 22 April 1985, London

A.C.Gimson was a phonetician known throughout the world for his works on English pronunciation. He became Professor of Phonetics at University College London in 1966, and from 1971 until his retirement in 1983 was Head of its Department of Phonetics and Linguistics 语言学.

It was as an undergraduate 大学生 at UCL, where he was to take a First in French, that Gimson first came into contact with the subject he was to make his own, through Professor Daniel Jones, then Head of the Department of Phonetics. But this was in 1939, and before he could fully develop his interest he was called up into the British army. There he acted as liaison officer, first with the French and then with the Free Polish forces. By 1945 he held the rank of Major 少校; Jones inter'vened to get him an early discharge so that he could join him as Lecturer in Phonetics.

Jones groomed Gimson as his successor 培训某人. When Jones retired in 1949, Gimson took over from him as Secretary of the International Phonetic Association and Editor of its journal.

In the fifties, English phonetics was still 'dominated by Jones's approach 方法. Valuable in its day, by now it was becoming dated 琼斯的辉煌时代已经过时. Gimson maintained Jones's emphasis 重点 on practical performance 性能 (both in producing and in recognizing sounds), but re-in'vigorated 振兴 English phonetic theory and practice by 'propagating 传播 views de'riving 起源 from contemporary 当代 American structuralist doctrine 教义, including the /phoneme/ [allophone 音位变体] notational distinction 符号区别, and by extending 延伸 Jo'nesian ear-training exercises with minimal-pair 最小对 drills. When his Introduction to the Pronunciation of English first appeared in 1962, it was immediately accepted as the standard description of RP, displacing Jones's own works from this role.

Gimson was a popular lecturer and broadcaster 广播员, and in the sixties became familiar to the British public through a 'series of brief talks on pronunciation he gave as part of the breakfast-time Today programme on the BBC. But it is in the world of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) that his name is particularly well known. He made frequent overseas lecture tours at the invitation 邀请 of the British Council, Linguaphone, or local universities. His English Pronunciation Practice (1965, with G.F.Arnold) and A Practical Course of English Pronunciation: a per'ceptual 感性的 approach (1975) reflect his concern with the teaching of pronunciation in this context.

Perhaps Gimson's most enduring influence on EFL will be in the matter of phonetic transcription 音标. Although Jones had experimented with a number of different types of transcription 翻译 for English (all within an IPA framework 框架),

his English Pronouncing Dictionary and other EFL-oriented 导向的 works used a notation 符号 in which vowel length was 'symbolized 象征 explicitly 明确地, but length-related quality differences only implicitly 含蓄地 (*bead* bi:d, *bid* bi:d, *caught* kɔ:t, *cot* kɔ:t). By the sixties this notation had a serious competitor in a system used Abercrombie and others, in which quality differences were explicitly shown and length marks not used (*bead* bi:d, *bid* bi:d, *caught* kɔ:t, *cot* kɔ:t). Gimson succeeded in achieving a synthesis 综合 of the two types, such that both quantity and quality were made explicit, even at the price of added redundancy (*bead* bi:d, *bid* bi:d, *caught* kɔ:t, *cot* kɔ:t). He 'popularized 使流行 this notation first in his Introduction and then, crucially 最重要的是, in the fourteenth edition of Jones's EPD (1977; Gimson had taken over the editorship in 1964). It has swept the EFL world.

In the early 1960's University College London had set up a Department of Linguistics, separate from its long-established Department of Phonetics. When D. B. Fry relinquished the headship of the latter, in 1973, the two departments were combined under Gimson's leadership. At that time the Department's main teaching load was for students who were not registered for any University degree but for the Li'centiate-ship 硕士 of the College of Speech Therapy. Gimson took a major role in the reorganization of speech therapy education in Britain and the conversion 转变 of speech therapy (now called speech and language therapy) into an all-graduate profession. At UCL he was responsible for the arrangement whereby 凭借 students of what became the National Hospital's College of Speech Sciences were registered for the BSc as undergraduates of University College. Under Jones, phonetics had been something of an orphan subject in university terms, taught only to occasional students and post'graduates 研究生; Gimson left the Department of Phonetics and Linguistics one of the strongest in the UCL Arts Faculty 艺术学院, with a large undergraduate body.

For some reason, Gimson did not like people to call him by his first name: indeed, its i'dentity 鉴定 was something of a mystery, since as a writer, broadcaster or lecturer he was always just "A. C. Gimson". His friends and 'colleagues knew him as "Gim" /gim/. He died unexpectedly of heart attack shortly after his retirement, by which time he was President of the International Phonetic Association and not only the most influential British phonetician but one who was much loved by all his colleagues and students.

J.C.Wells 1992 12 22