

# The Department of Phonetics and Linguistics at SOAS.

## The Institutional Life of Firthian Prosodic Analysis *versus* its Official History.

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### ABSTRACT

British linguist John R. Firth (1890-1960) is said to be the responsible of the theory of context of situation and the theory of prosodic analysis [1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7]. Firthian Prosodic Analysis (FPA) is a phonetic and phonological technique mainly applied by Firth's disciples, the so-called London School. FPA is approached in this paper by means of the institutional development of the Department of Phonetics and Linguistics at the *School of Oriental and African Studies* (SOAS) during the years between 1945 and 1970.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In order to devise a set of arguments to illustrate the fact that Firth's disciples developed prosodic analysis from his limited notes, certain hypotheses must be considered: (a) There is a complete absence of programmatic work in Firth's works. (b) Firth gave a very small place to phonetics and phonology in his articles, mainly in those published after 1948. There is also the circumstance that Firth never did prosodic analysis. (c) The detailed study of the phonological categories used in the analysis by the School reveals a theoretical complexity totally absent from Firth's works [8]. Apart from the theoretical significance of these hypothesis, the study of the institutional life at SOAS reveals the relevant role of some members of this School in the creation, development, and theoretical support of FPA. The aim of this paper is to acknowledge the place of the London School in the development of FPA, and to reconsider Firth's theoretical responsibilities by means of the academic and institutional places held by members of the London School such as Eileen Whitley (1910-1988) and Eugénie Henderson (1914-1989).

### 2. THE DEPARTMENT OF PHONETICS AND LINGUISTICS AT SOAS

The growing politics of SOAS after World War II was established in order to place the study of languages and linguistics within the new world situation. Together with the first Inter-Departmental Committee to consider the

School's "Case for Increased Financial Assistance" (yet in 1938), certain Plans for Development (1944), and the Scarborough Commission (also in 1944), Firth's efforts as the Head of the Department (plus other institutional responsibilities inside and outside SOAS) decided an outstanding development of the departmental human resources. However, the targets of the Scarborough Report were never reached at all due to financial causes, although the department's development can be foreseen in the following table at the end of first quinquennium (1947-1952):

	Proposed Staff for 1955	Staff 1955-56	Staff 1959-60
Professor	2	1	1
Reader	5	3	3
Senior Lecturer	-	1	2
Lecturer	11	10 (7+3)	8 (7+1)
Assistant	-	4	2
Others	3	1	1

*Lecturer: Lecturer + Assistant Lecturer*

**Table 1:** Comparison between proposed staff and staff.

The following table schematises the development in the department:

	1945-1946	1952-1953	1955-1956	1957-1958
Professor	1	1	1	1
Reader	-	1	3	3
Lecturer	5 (1+4)	17 (2+15)	11 (1+7+3)	12 (2+9+1)
Assistant	-	7	3	2
Others	-	4	1	2

**Table 2:** Comparison between academic years (posts).

Next quinquennia offered the following state of the department compared to later years:

	1959-60	1964-65	1974-75
PROFESSOR	1	4	4
READER	3	1	3
LECTURER	10 (3+7+1)	9 (1+7+1)	6
ASSISTANT	2	2	-
OTHERS	1	2	2

**Table 3:** Staff of the Phonetics and Linguistics Department by years.

### 3. THE LONDON SCHOOL

Principal members of this School are said to be: Kenneth H. Albrow, William S. Allen, Jack Carnochan, Eugénie J.A. Henderson, Terence Hill, John Kelly, Terence F. Mitchell, Frank R. Palmer, Robert H. Robins, Norman C. Scott, Keith Sprigg, Natalie Waterson, and Eileen Whitley, although it covers somehow more than a *generation*. This paper mainly refers to the first one. The state of the department in the academic year 1952-53 is presented in the following table:

POST	(NUMBER) MEMBER
PROFESSOR (1)	Firth
READER (1)	Scott
SENIOR LECTURER (2)	Henderson, Whitley
LECTURER (15)	Albrow, Allen, Carnochan, [Honey], [Hughes], [W.E. Jones], Mitchell, Palmer, [Price], Robins, Sharp, Shorto, Sprigg, [Stead], Waterson
ASSISTANTS	7
OTHERS	4

[/]: Not indispensable for FPA development

**Table 4:** Posts and members of the Department

The theoretical birth and growth of *classical* Firthian Prosodic Analysis (1948-1970) can be stated in three stages [8]: first stage covers the years between 1948 (Firth's publication of "Sounds and Prosodies" and first articles of FPA: Carnochan, Henderson and Scott's) and 1952-53; this stage is mainly *phonetic*, as the phonological technique (later FPA) was developing throughout the papers and the department's seminars. Second stage includes the years between 1953 and 1960, the year Firth died (although his retirement came in 1956); the stage sees the development of the theoretical autonomy from Firth's works by means, among other reasons, of the internal and external debates held at the department. Last stage covers until 1970, a

period characterised by the dispersion of some analysts and the downturn in the number of articles F.R. Palmer edited *Prosodic Analysis* in 1970 and, somehow symbolically, closed this *classical* FPA life[9].

### 4. THE ACADEMIC AND INSTITUTIONAL PLACE OF CERTAIN ANALYSTS (1940-1960)

Last sections described the importance of the institutional growth in the career of this phonological technique: the increase of the posts implied the raise of a firthian sphere. The aim of this section is to analyze the role of the *academy* in FPA's development. Reports and guides from SOAS academic years were emptied in order to accomplish the results presented in this section. Three years were chosen as representative of FPA's different stages: 1949-50, theoretically belonging to FPA's first stage; and 1953-54 and 1956-57 years that go with FPA's second stage: this phase is characterised by an editorial and institutional peak and by Firth's retirement.

This section offers a general idea of the teaching within the department. Throughout this analysis, representative authors of FPA within the department were studied (Henderson, Whitley, Carnochan, Robins, Palmer, Waterson, Allen and Scott). The year these authors arrived to the department with a post was also considered in order to observe internal promotion. It was noted the total number of subjects taught by each member, divided into those taught alone or together with other members of the department. The number of hours taught alone was divided into the total amount of teaching hours to reach an average of hours per subject.

In a broad outline, the great development of the Linguistics part of the department (compared to the Phonetics part) stands out, although it is the teaching of different languages the function that really supports the department. This Linguistics area saw the fastest promotion and an important increase in the number of disciplines, although such a number was always far from the total number of the Oriental and African languages taught. On the contrary, as the Linguistics part seems to be assured by Firth, the Phonetics part was on the shoulders of Whitley, Henderson, and Carnochan. But the curious detail is that articles published during those years by the members of the department were mainly phonetic and phonological: this fact points directly to the teaching and instruction being on the hands of Whitley, Henderson, and Carnochan. In this sense, the teaching labor of people such as Eileen Whitley stands out, although her lack of publications –among other reasons- set her apart from the *official* history of Firthian Prosodic Analysis. Whitley's work only emerges if the day-by-day life of the department is approached in depth. In fact, even Henderson attended Whitley's courses: her notes on these are held in the York Prosodic Archive, and its consult offers serious clues to refute Firth's paternity of prosodic analysis (for a guide to the York Prosodic Archive,

see <http://www.york.ac.uk/depts/lang/fpa>). Disciplines and teachers are showed in the following tables:

SUBJECT	TEACHER
General Linguistics	Firth
<i>Introduction to Linguistics and Phonetics</i>	Allen, Carnochan, Robins
<i>Linguistics and Phonetics</i>	Mitchell, Robins
<i>Introduction to the Comparative Study of the Indo-European Languages</i>	Allen
<i>Theory of Comparative Linguistics</i>	Allen

**Table 5:** Linguistics (1953-54)

SUBJECT	TEACHER
<i>Phonetic Analysis and Phonological Statement</i>	Whitley
<i>Phonetics (PhD, M.A.)</i>	Henderson, Whitley
<i>Kymography and Palatography</i>	Carnochan

**Table 6:** Phonetics and Phonology (1953-54)

It seems clear by the revision of the institutional life that Firth's intention was to promote Linguistics first: in doing so, it was easier to get promotion belonging to this area. Curiously enough, the weight at SOAS of the Phonetics and Linguistics Department lied in the teaching of languages (Table 7) and, in that sense, in the phonetic and phonological part of the languages studied. And curiously enough, Firth's place in Linguistics is linked with these phonetic and phonological analyses published by the members of the department. The articles published by all these authors throughout these years correspond to languages taught by him/her at SOAS.

Then Whitley and Henderson's situation at the department must be reconsidered: (a) both share the same teaching situation than the rest of the members of the department. (b) Both are responsible of the teaching of Phonetics -together with Carnochan- and Phonology in the department, what means the instruction of all the people attending the courses of the department (included those that later became teachers in it). (c) Both have an active theoretical presence in prosodic analysis: participating in the seminars (remember the importance of such seminars in the constitution of the London School), researching, teaching, and publishing. (d) Both developed at SOAS their academic careers. (e) In Henderson's case, hers are some of the most quoted articles of FPA (mainly [11, 12]). (f) However, they did not appear in the group of people chosen

by Firth to publish in his *Studies of Linguistic Analysis*. Despite of the title, most articles included in this volume are FPA.

LANGUAGE	TEACHER
<i>Arabic</i>	Mitchell
<i>Berber</i>	Mitchell
<i>Dravidian Languages</i>	Whitley
<i>Hindustani</i>	Whitley
<i>Tibetan</i>	Sprigg
<i>Turkish</i>	Waterson
<i>Burmese</i>	Sprigg
<i>Fijian</i>	Scott
<i>Hausa</i>	Carnochan
<i>Igbo</i>	Carnochan
<i>Japanese</i>	Scott
<i>Sanskrit</i>	Allen
<i>Siamese</i>	Henderson
<i>Sundanese</i>	Robins
<i>Swahili</i>	Sharp
<i>Szechuanese</i>	Scott
<i>Vietnamese</i>	Henderson
<i>Cambodian</i>	Henderson
<i>Chaga</i>	Sharp
<i>Fulani</i>	Carnochan
<i>Sea Dayak</i>	Scott
<i>Yoruba</i>	Carnochan
<i>Cyrenaican Arabic</i>	Mitchell
<i>Turkish -Kazan</i>	Waterson
<i>Lepcha</i>	Sprigg

**Table 7:** Language teaching, 1953-54

The year 1956-57 again shows an increase of the total number of disciplines taught at the department (in this case,

there are fifty-seven). It is outstanding Firth's absence -as he retired the previous academic year- and Allen's, who left the department. This year includes the entrance of Frank R. Palmer and Natalie Waterson, very well known members of this School. There were only small changes referred to Table 5, 6, and 7.

In this year there is also an increase in Whitley's teaching; but despite this responsibility, she had no promotion in the department. Carnochan became Senior Lecturer and Robins became Reader, although they did not see an augment in their teaching. It is objective to think about Whitley's lack of publications as an obstacle in her university promotion. However, it is outstanding her importance (together with Henderson and Carnochan) in the formation of the analysts associated to the phonological technique called *Firthian Prosodic Analysis*.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

Members of the London School are usually unknown even in secondary bibliography of this School [6]. Moreover, they are not usually acknowledged although this phonological technique was mainly developed throughout their publications. A comparison between Firth's statements on phonology and the real prosodic analysis reveals a theoretical complexity only acquired throughout the fieldwork later published in the shape of the articles written by the members of the School [8, 13].

The aim of this paper was to present the institutional and academic development of the Department of Phonetics and Linguistics at SOAS in order to offer non-theoretical clues on the responsibility of FPA's construction: in this sense, Whitley's importance reveals interesting, at least because she is not usually acknowledged bibliographically due to her lack of publications (Henderson and Carnochan are). The intention of this paper was twofold:

- To reconsider mainly Whitley and Henderson's place in the department and their responsibility in the development of FPA, as they were the instructors and teachers of students, researchers, and members of the department. There is also the circumstance that Henderson is one of the most quoted authors of FPA amongst the analysts, and that she was one of the theoretician of this phonological technique. It is also interesting to review Whitley's status within the department and to evaluate her lack of publications and its consequences in the acknowledgement of the theoretical responsibility in FPA's development [see Whitley's study of Irish in 14].
- To add certain thesis to confirm the general hypothesis of this research line [9 and others]: that prosodic analysis was developed by the members of the London School and not at all by John Firth. Although the analysis belongs to a general firthian theory of linguistics, Firth's theoretical responsibility stays at the latter, not at the former.

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