

Phonetic transcriptions in 20th century Swedish schoolbooks

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Abstract

In Sweden, for well over a century, phonetic transcriptions have figured in foreign language textbooks. Among early 20th century examples are beginners' books (English, French, and Russian), where entire chapters are transcribed in IPA. It is suggested that pupils start learning the new language by reading IPA texts before meeting ordinary orthography, with the purpose of avoiding mispronunciation caused by false assumptions about the relationship between written and spoken L₂. Phonetic transcriptions also occur in textbooks in Swedish language aimed at younger or less advanced pupils. These transcriptions, made up mainly of characters from the Swedish alphabet, mostly provide pronunciation of foreign geographical names. After the Second World War, English was substituted for German as first foreign language in Sweden. This meant an increase in IPA use, even more so when, in the mid 1950's, English became compulsory from age eleven, not only in secondary schools, but also in the *folkskola*. Towards the end of last century, teachers seem to have turned less enthusiastic about teaching IPA, possibly judging it unnecessary, their pupils being increasingly exposed to spoken English through popular culture. Phonetic transcriptions thus fell out of fashion, and general knowledge of them tapered off. But in the IT world, the turn of the 21st century has brought a trend shift. With the advent of the Swedish language edition of Wikipedia (2001), an increasing number of IPA transcriptions have emerged, signalling a renaissance for phonetic transcriptions outside of schools, boosted by a craze for square brackets among marketing and advertising people.

Keywords: phonetic transcriptions, IPA, Sweden, schoolbooks, 20th century

Introduction

L'association phonétique internationale (API) or the *International Phonetic Association* (IPA), was founded in Paris in 1886. Two years later, the *Alphabet of the International Phonetic Association*, commonly known by the same acronym, IPA, was published. Its original objective was to help secondary school pupils to achieve a better pronunciation of foreign languages, this in an era when viable methods of technical sound recording were not yet readily available. In the Nordic countries of Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Finland, a growing interest in dialect recording already had resulted in the creation of national alphabets for this purpose: *Dania* by Otto Jespersen (one of the first promoters of IPA), *Norvegia* by Johan Storm, the Swedish *Landsmålsalfabetet* by Johan August Lundell, and a corresponding notation for Finnish dialects by Emil Nestor Setälä. Jespersen and Lundell were professors of English in Copenhagen, and Slavonic languages in Uppsala, respectively. Both of them were also authors of schoolbooks. Together with Emil Rodhe (1863–1936), *docent* in Lund and Gothenburg, Jespersen wrote an English textbook for use in Sweden, provided with extensive phonetic transcriptions by George Ernest Fuhrken (born 1870), Dr. phil., M. A., lecturer in English at Uppsala University.

(*Landsmålsalfabetet* is so elaborate that it could successfully serve Swedish sinologist *Bernhard Karlgren* [1889–1978, who learnt it from his brother Anton, a pupil of Lundell's, at Uppsala University], for recording during his dialect fieldwork in China in 1910–1912 and subsequently.)

Foreign language textbooks

Three early 20th century readers stand out as beginners' books where entire chapters are phonetically transcribed in IPA: an English one by Jespersen & Rodhe (1907), a French one by Hultenberg (1909) and a Russian one by Lundell (1911). The latter author suggests teachers let pupils start learning the new language by talking and by reading IPA texts before meeting texts in ordinary orthography, for the purpose of avoiding mispronunciation caused by false assumptions about the relationship between written and spoken L₂. These books are characterized by a high level of ambition, conceived, as they were, by advanced scholars with modern educational ideas, and intended for an elite of students. Thus, their transcriptions with few exceptions follow the principles of the IPA. Still today, also the contents of the texts appear astonishingly modern; e.g., Hultenberg's *Premier livre de lecture française* vividly narrates the story of a schoolboy from Stockholm staying with a French family in the *Quartier Latin* of Paris to improve his French.

Phonetic transcriptions remained an unbroken tradition in similar readers throughout the 20th century, though often swedcized varieties of IPA were employed. Transcriptions were most commonly used for English and French but also, to a certain extent, for German.

The principal differences between IPA *stricto sensu* and the Swedish varieties dominating until about 1970, concern

- (1) An alternative stress-mark system
- (2) The substitution of certain IPA signs
- (3) The printing of phonetic signs in italics rather than roman, coupled with frequent omitting of square brackets.

Stress-mark systems

In regular IPA, primary as well as secondary stress – if shown – is indicated by a straight, vertical stroke of even breadth

throughout its length – in super- or subscript respectively – *to the left of the syllable in question*, e.g. **constitution** [ˌkɔnstɪˈtʃuːʃn], whereas the Swedish schoolbook convention usually focuses on main stress, which is marked by an *acute accent after the vowel or diphthong sign(s) of the most prominent syllable*: [kɔnstɪtʃuːʃn]. This practice has been featuring in Swedish encyclopaedias since the mid 1870's (Nordisk Familjebok, First edition, 1876), and is also found in present-day U.S. reference books like the Encyclopedia Americana.

A Swedish variety of the sign for voiceless (inter)dental fricative

As to individual signs, in Swedish textbooks as well as dictionaries, the most striking discrepancy from IPA use is the substitution of the Nordic sign *thorn*, [þ] (of runic origin), for IPA [θ]. Most probably, this change was performed because it was thought that pupils were previously acquainted with the sign from studying the *futhark* (runic alphabet) in their Swedish lessons.

Italics, square brackets

In English and French readers, where transcriptions often appear in double columned pages, in parallel with ordinary orthography, square brackets are frequently omitted, and the transcriptions are set in italics to distinguish them from the text per se.

Two English textbooks played a dominant role in the middle of the 20th century: *Engelsk nybörjarbok*, 'English beginner's book'. (Björkhagen, 1928) and *Hallo England, Book one* (Eiding & Sondelius, 1955). The latter starts by a page featuring nine words, each one illustrated by an elegant drawing against a coloured background, captioned with phonetic transcription in parallel:

A BOY ə bɔɪ, A GIRL ə gɜ:l, A DOG ə dɔg,

A CAT ə kæt, A HOUSE ə haus,

A GLASS ə gla:s, AN APPLE ən æpl,

AN EGG ən eg, AN ELEPHANT ən e'lɪfənt.

Introduction of regular IPA

In 1959, a so-called English–English dictionary (Hornby & Parnwell, 1959) was introduced to the Swedish public by one of Sweden’s leading publishing houses, Norstedt, in collaboration with Oxford University Press. With preface and explanations in Swedish, it was a parallel edition of *Oxford English-Reader’s Dictionary* (Hornby & Parnwell, first published in 1952).

This event marked a milestone in the history of phonetic transcriptions in Swedish schools, in that it broke a tradition of sweditized transcriptions that had prevailed for several decades. The monolingual dictionary featured the true IPA stress-mark system and reintroduced [θ], modelled on the Greek lower case letter *theta*. Gradually, a change took place in Sweden; round 1970 some textbooks had adopted the same system. However, bilingual dictionaries mostly stuck to the previous system, since, for economic reasons, year after year, they were reprinted in stereotyped editions.

General readers and geography textbooks

Sweden being a country where, by tradition, proper pronunciation of loanwords and foreign names confers prestige, also saw less scientific varieties of transcriptions appear.

Round 1900, the leading – and then still competing – educational publishing houses, *Bonnier* and *Norstedt* engaged well-known cultural personalities like author Selma Lagerlöf and art critic Carl G. Laurin to write for them. In texts about foreign places, simplified phonetic transcriptions were made use of, similar to those later (1959) introduced by *Systembolaget* (the Swedish alcohol monopoly) in its product catalogues.

Foreign names, e.g. English or French ones, pronounced according to Swedish general text-to-speech rules, in Sweden would have given an absurd, in certain cases even stigmatizing, impression, and would often hardly have been intelligible to native speakers of the tar-

get languages, e.g. *Knightsbridge* pronounced [ˈknɪɡtsˌbrɪdʒə]. Therefore, such names were phonetically transcribed. In Norstedt’s *Läsebok för folkskolan* (1922) we find the following examples in chapter 33, *Paris*, written by Carl G. Laurin: *Champs Elysées* (sjangs elisé), *Avenue de l’Opéra* (aveny dö låpera˘), *Quartier Latin* (kartjé latäng). Evidently, the use and placement of the acute accents are not consistent.

In a classical geography textbook for the compulsory school – initially named *folkskola* – (Swedberg & Hagnell, 1927), the pronunciation of many foreign geographical names were clarified by phonetic transcriptions ever since this first edition until its twenty-third in 1953, as well as in subsequent editions, modified for more recent curricula, until Hagnell’s death in 1962. For a long period of time, those transcriptions consisted exclusively of letters from the Swedish alphabet (including its final *å*, *ä*, and *ö*, letters in their own right – not diacritical versions of *a* and *o*), but in the first half of the 1950’s, a new symbol emerged: the general Germanic sign [p], to represent the pronunciation of English (th) when this combination of letters denotes a *voiceless* dental fricative. However, still in the 19th edition (1950) it is lacking, a fact that indicates a connexion to the introduction of English on a large scale in Swedish schools, as does the adoption, also in the 1950’s, of the IPA sign [ʃ] for a voiceless alveolar sibilant.

Here are a few examples that demonstrate the usage in the first edition of Swedberg & Hagnell: p. 48 *Warszawa* (varscha˘va), p. 53 *Sheffield* (sjä˘ffild); here, in a somewhat inconsistent manner, both *sch* and *sj* represent [ʃ]. The combination *sj* is also used to render sweditized pronunciations where the Swedish [ʃ], as being the closest equivalent, is substituted for French [ʒ] (/ʒ/ does not exist as a phoneme in Swedish): p. 59 *Genève* (sjönä˘v), p. 72 *Alger* (alsje˘), corresponding to English *Geneva* and *Algiers*.

Results and discussion

Sweden is a country with a small population, where achieving an academic education – with the possible exception for law studies – has always been virtually impossible without knowledge of at least one foreign language. Therefore, it is no wonder that close to native-like pronunciation of foreign names adds to a person's prestige.

During their heyday, phonetic transcriptions, either in IPA – or some variety of it – or ad hoc systems, were generally present in foreign language textbooks, especially English or French ones. Similarly, in books for primary education, simplified transcriptions figured even prior to the turn of the 20th century, probably intended as a help for teachers, who could not always be expected to master foreign languages.

In the first half of the 20th century, gramophones or record players were not in Everyman's possession, and nor were tape recorders until the commercial breakthrough of the cassette recorder in the 1960's. This implies that Swedish pupils at that time were by no means as exposed to foreign languages, notably English, in spoken or sung form, as they were to become in the late 1900's. Consequently, pupils were at least visually exposed to phonetic transcriptions, amply used in their textbooks, even if they did not make active use of them.

At the turn of the 21st century, the situation was quite a different one. The studying of foreign languages had fallen into decline, except for English, and, to a certain extent, Spanish. The breakthrough of television in Sweden took place in 1958, and meant a rapid increase in exposure to English, since the lion's share of foreign films shown were in English, and Sweden has never dubbed any foreign films, except for those directed to children. The massive passion for rock and pop music among young people and a tendency among teachers to overrate the pupils' knowledge of English may have contributed to passing

phonetic transcriptions into oblivion in schools.

However, the advent of the Swedish language edition of Wikipedia (2001) has given rise to an increasing number of IPA transcriptions. Initially, they often were of inferior quality, but in course of time, they have improved, signalling a renaissance for phonetic transcriptions outside of schools. A parallel, bizarre phenomenon is a craze for square brackets among marketing and advertising people. Even if some of them are serious endeavours to give pronunciation advice to customers, a great many are nothing but decorative nonsense.

Conclusions

After a prolonged slump in the use of IPA and phonetic transcriptions in general, the IT world currently seems to promote a change. On the internet, you will find not only transcriptions galore but animated discussions about pronunciation issues. Possibly this will result in a renaissance for IPA transcriptions in Swedish schoolbooks.

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