A Review of *Einführung in die deutsche Phonetik*  
by Ursula Hirschfeld*  

Bruno H. Repp

This video introduction to German phonetics, apparently the first of its kind, was produced by Ursula Hirschfeld who is currently head of the Working Group in Phonetics at the University of Leipzig. This group has been active in applied phonetics for a number of years, with particular attention to the teaching of German as a second language and the development of materials for that purpose. The present video course thus is the outgrowth of extensive practical experience as well as of a solid grounding in phonetic theory. Much of the work was done under rather difficult conditions before the political unification of Germany, and its successful completion reflects the dedication and persistence of Dr. Hirschfeld.

The course is intended for use in teacher training, class instruction, and home study. The 70-minute tape comprises 8 short lessons on the following topics: intonation and stress; unrounded vowels; rounded vowels; diphthongs; plosives; fricatives and fricatives in combination (2 lectures); and nasals. Each lecture features two main protagonists who are seated at a desk facing the viewer: a charming young woman named Christine and a droll life-size puppet (a cross between a university professor and an old Germanic warrior, featuring a movable jaw and a human right hand) named Hermann. Christine speaks the examples while Hermann provides the phonetic explanations (in British English on my tape; German and Polish versions are also available).

The explanations are illustrated with tables and graphs which are reproduced in the accompanying booklet, together with all sample utterances, a glossary, and a list of phonetic symbols. Some of the lessons include a display of a schematic vocal tract in motion. All lessons focus briefly on spelling-sound relationships. They further include a brief scene acted out by people in the studio, which uses some of the words practiced previously by Christine. Finally, each lecture concludes with short takes of various passers-by in the streets of different German towns, each of whom speaks some of the target words in a natural and unrehearsed way, presumably elicited by a question from the interviewer. I focus now on each of these components of the didactic action in turn, slicing the pie horizontally, as it were.

It is difficult to find fault with Christine. A student of phonetics in real life at the time of recording, she speaks with precision, behaves naturally in front of the camera, and displays a winning smile that makes her fun to watch. She introduces the topic of each lecture in German before Hermann takes over in English, and while her introductory sentence is not likely to be understood by beginners, it does set the scene in the target language. After Hermann introduces some phones or explains some rule, Christine produces the examples, usually first in isolation, then in selected words or short sentences. Each utterance is repeated once, the second time somewhat more casually than the first. There is no time for the student viewer to insert his/her own repetition; while this may be a shortcoming for home study, pauses on the tape would naturally have slackened the pace.

The variety of German being spoken by Christine is not defined explicitly in the booklet. Obviously, it is meant to be representative of
standard German, and indeed it is, in so far as the Northern variety is to be considered as a supra-regional standard. In a time of increasing emancipation of regional variants the assumption of such a standard may be questioned, however, and it might have been prudent to specify in the booklet the regional provenance of the dialect spoken. One pronunciation I found surprising was that of the first vowel in Gläser (the only example given) as [ɛ:], which seems a "spelling pronunciation" to me; the common rendition would seem to be [æ:]. (It certainly is in my own dialect, that of Vienna.) This is confirmed by Christine's production of the same word in a later lecture, where she clearly pronounces it with [æ:]. On the other hand, she does pronounce Mädchen (which occurs in the fricative lesson) with an [ɛ:], though the vowel is raised slightly in the repetition. The contrast between [ɛ:] and [æ:] may well be on its way out as the language continues to change. As Dr. Hirschfeld has pointed out to me in personal communication, however, its inclusion in this course helps focus students' attention on the correct quality for [ɛ:]. The only other peculiarity I noticed is that Christine pronounces the isolated fricative /ʃ/ with some uvular vibration, so that it sounds like a snoring sound.

A special feature of this course are the hand movements with which Christine accompanies some of her articulations. Thus she mimics the F0 contour of different intonations with up-down motions of her right hand (going from right to left on the screen, contrary to the graphs displayed subsequently), marks stressed syllables by bringing the palms of her hands together, moves her fists apart as if stretching a ribbon for tense vowels while moving her parallel open hands downwards for lax vowels, marks glottal stops with downward movements of one hand, etc. (Of course, only one of these movements is executed at a time, to illustrate whatever feature is being discussed.) It is an empirical question to what extent such gestures may be helpful to students. Their inclusion may indicate that Dr. Hirschfeld found this technique useful in her teaching.

In contrast to Christine's distinct and closely observable articulations, Hermann moves his bearded lips in an indistinct mumbling motion, suitable for overdubbing of various languages. This works well enough in the English version I viewed; however, in some lectures Hermann introduces other participants in German, speaking in what seems a different voice, which is decidedly strange. (Dr. Hirschfeld has informed me that it is in fact the same bilingual speaker, so I attribute the impression of different voices to prosodic discontinuity.) The English explanations are delivered clearly but cast in a fairly technical language that students not schooled in phonetics may have some difficulty with. In one instance, when explaining the glottal stop, Hermann mispronounces "liaison" as "elision." To illustrate liaison, the example Mein_Name ist_Schmidt is used; however, it is not so clear what the alternative pronunciation of ist_Schmidt might be. Christine never provides examples of incorrect pronunciations. Also, examples are rarely presented in terms of minimal pairs, and sometimes contrasting segments do not even occur in the same syllabic position, even when that would be phonotactically possible. Apparently, priority was given to keeping the vocabulary within narrow limits (200 relatively common words and names), to enable beginning students to follow along easily.

The terms gespannt and ungespannt for vowels are rendered by Hermann in English as "taut" versus "loose" at first, but as "tense" versus "lax" later on. (Whether either pair of terms makes sense to a language learner is questionable, since the physiological correlates of these features are complex.) Similarly, for consonants Hermann first speaks of "degrees of tightness," but then reverts to "tense" and "lax." In a somewhat exaggerated illustration of the distinction between tense and lax plosives, Christine articulates /pe, be, te, de, ka, ge/ with a piece of paper in front of her lips. The term "aspiration" is not mentioned by Hermann, and the viewer may wonder how tenseness or tightness causes the paper to move away from Christine's lips. Also, the different vocalic context for /k/ seems awkward; apparently it was chosen to correspond to the German letter name which, however, seems irrelevant in this example. In some of the later lessons, by the way, Hermann (speaking English) refers to letters by their German names, which is jarring.

Two tables displayed both on the video screen and in the booklet show the German vowels and consonants in IPA notation, arranged according to their distinctive features. The phonetic symbols are explained in the booklet, but the names of the features are unfortunately rendered in German and thus not readily intelligible to the language learner. (Translations are provided separately in the booklet, however.) While rounded vowels are denoted as rund or gerundet, there seems to be no German term for "unrounded." Likewise, the term unbebetont (unstressed), applied to schwa, has no contrasting term in the table. The classification of /j/ as a lax fricative rather than as a glide is
The first lesson makes use of schematic F0 contours accompanying the orthography, with stress indicated by bolding. The choice of the word Hallo to exemplify a trochaic stress pattern is not optimal in view of its long final vowel and its dialectal variation. It is definitely iambic in my Southern dialect, and several of the passers-by saying Hallo at the end of the lecture produce it that way. Halle (the name of the German city, which is part of the base vocabulary) would have been a better choice. The fall-rise intonation pattern is said to occur in yes-no questions and "very friendly" utterances—a rather vague characterization. The spelling of double /k/ as ck would have deserved a special comment.

The phenomenon of final devoicing of plosives could have been treated in more detail. It is presented as a spelling convention rather than as a phonological rule, but whereas the examples for /d/ and /g/ show the consonant in word-final position, the /b/ in the example gibt is not word-final. Hermann says that /b,d,g/ "after a vowel as the final part of a word or syllable" are pronounced as [p,t,k]. Viewers might be confused by the reference to syllables (is a word-internal but syllable-final plosive to be devoiced?) and by the fact that the /b/ in the example is neither word- nor syllable-final. However, Hermann merely advises "to pay close attention" and leaves it at that. The same problem occurs in connection with the pronunciation of -ig as [-ix], which is said to apply "at the end of words or syllables."

In discussing the "joining" of plosives and fricatives (the terms "cluster" or "affricate" are not used), Hermann points out that each consonant must be pronounced clearly, which does not jibe with the fact that the /t/ in /ts/ and the /p/ in /pf/ are unaspirated. (By contrast, the /k/ in /kv/ retains its aspiration.) As is illustrated by two of the passers-by at the end of the lecture, the /p/ in Pfennig is often deleted altogether.

The short acted-out studio scenes are generally delightful. The emphasis here is on intelligibility rather than spontaneity. Nevertheless, the dialogues are quite natural, and the participants represent both sexes and a wide range of ages. The youngest participant, Tilli (about 4 years old), is very cute in her breakfast scene but mispronounces für as [fie]. The sound is sometimes a little distant, so that manual adjustment of the level may be required during playback.

Finally, informal speech is presented in the street scenes, which are likewise useful and pleasantly human. The utterances are generally very brief. Again, a healthy variation of ages is represented among the participants, most of
whom appear in several lectures. The dialect variation, on the other hand, is relatively limited, undoubtedly due to restrictions on Dr. Hirschfeld’s ability to travel outside East Germany. Thus only a single representative of Southern German is included (an elderly man from Vienna), and only a few from West Germany; the majority are from East German towns and exhibit considerable homogeneity of pronunciation.

**In summary**, while I have done my best to find details to quibble with, there is no question that this is an instructive and entertaining course which should be of great value in supplementing the teaching of German as a foreign language.

**FOOTNOTE**
*(Video tape with accompanying booklet.) Ismaning, FRG: Max Hueber Verlag, 1992. Running time 70 minutes. DM 120. This review will appear in *Language and Speech*, 36(1) (1993).*