Abstract

This paper presents work in progress, aimed at a doctoral dissertation on displaying pronunciation to the users of general encyclopedias, particularly those in Swedish language. Various types of phonetic notations are studied and compared; also some pronunciation dictionaries are taken into account. The problems of finding an optimal way of presenting pronunciation to users are scrutinized and discussed. Furthermore, so-called audio pronunciations, i.e. recordings of read words in digital encyclopedias, are treated from several points of view.

Introduction

When consulting encyclopedias, getting hold of the pronunciation of an entry can be quite a tricky affair, because of the multitude of phonetic notations being used in various works. Some of these, such as the renowned Encyclopædia Britannica, published in the U.S.A., do not submit pronunciation data at all.

Among Swedish general encyclopedias, there is a long-established tradition of explaining to users how to pronounce words esteemed difficult. Customarily, this is done by way of phonetic transcriptions; since the advent of digital media, also sound recordings, ‘audio pronunciations’, have been made use of.

Scope and method of study

This study, which is intended to lead to a Ph.D. thesis, will focus on phonetic notation systems used in encyclopedias, particularly in Swedish language. The systems will be compared with each other and also with some notations used in pronunciation dictionaries—not only Swedish ones—and evaluated. So-called audio pronunciations, which are becoming increasingly frequent in digital reference works as a complement to phonetic transcriptions, will be studied separately.

The survey method is qualitative; by means of questionnaires, a panel of encyclopedia users will be consulted about their attitudes, expectations and preferences with regard to display of pronunciation.

An important issue will be that of optimizing pronunciation transcriptions. For someone consulting a reference book, it takes a certain effort to read up on the present transcription system. This effort ought to be in proportion to the benefit users get from it.

Other major issues that will be handled are pronunciation editors’ evaluation of sources of information, their choice of language varieties, ‘lects’, to be transcribed/recorded and their decisions about what phonetic features—at prosodic as well as segmental level—should be submitted in various types of works.

What pronunciation to display?

In the editing process of a reference book, an essential issue—from several aspects—is deciding what kind of pronunciation transcriptions should be based on. For Swedish, a rough consensus seems to exist, although some phonemes, like /rl/, and its combinations with following dentals may give rise to controversies.

In the Swedish language community, a small one with a relatively high general level of education, people are supposed to pronounce many loanwords and foreign proper names in a fairly source-language-like way.

For example, it would be stigmatizing to pronounce pommes frites or Colgate® as if they were ordinary Swedish words: [ˈpɔməsˈfriːtəs], [ˈkɔlɡəːtə]. Rather, the latter ought to be pronounced in its conventional quasi-English way: [ˈkɔlɡɛːt], and the former in the French way: [pɔmˈfrɛt]. However, in recent decades, the ellipsis pommes, with the low-prestige pronunciation [ˈpɔməs], has emerged.

In Sweden, a person with an academic education not mastering at least one foreign language can hardly be imagined. Prior to the abolition of the studentexamen (roughly comparable to the French baccalauréat) in 1968, at least two foreign languages were compulsory in secondary schools. Overall, there is a social pressure that creates a demand for information about ‘correct’ pronunciation in reference books and dictionaries.
Choice of lects of foreign languages; native vs. adapted pronunciation

Apart from settling what variety (accent) of Swedish should be used as a base for transcriptions, the problem of handling languages with more than one major variety, e.g. English, Spanish and Portuguese, are to be dealt with. On the one hand, native speakers of these languages normally use their own pronunciation wherever they are and whatever is their topic. On the other hand, when presenting the name of a person alive, it is usually a matter of courtesy for encyclopedias to report his/her own preferred pronunciation. In general, imposing to the bearer of a name a pronunciation totally alien to him/her comes—like misspelling it—close to being rude.

But as time goes by, frequently mentioned names, even personal ones, usually undergo the same pronunciation changes as loanwords do. This is the case for Beethoven (see Table 1). Notably enough, J.S. Bach keeps his German pronunciation [ˈbax] in Sweden—in spite of [x] having no phonemic status in Swedish—but has become [bak] in Denmark and [bak] or [baːk] in the U.K. In such cases, publishing in the first place the adapted (swedicized) pronunciation seems to be a good rule of thumb.

### Table 1. IPA transcriptions of Beethoven as habitually pronounced in some languages. In the Danish example, the apostrophe (’) denotes ‘stød’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Transcription</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>[ˈbetˌhoːfn̩]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>[ˈbèːtˌhoːvən]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danish</td>
<td>[ˈbeːtˌho̝ːwən]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British English</td>
<td>[ˈbeɪtˌ(h)əʊvn]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American English</td>
<td>[ˈbeɪtˌoʊvn]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>[beˈtovən], [betɔˈvən]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian</td>
<td>[bitˈxovan]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### What notation to use?

The transcriptions in Swedish general reference books published since the end of the 19th century are of many different kinds: some printed works—particularly older ones—employ only letters of the Swedish alphabet, others add a few special signs, and still others resort to a more or less extensive IPA notation, not seldom modified in some respects. In major Swedish encyclopedias there is a tendency over the last century to approach regular IPA, although a reluctance to accept the IPA way of marking stress seems to remain. This may be due to a solid tradition among monolingual Swedish glossaries etc. to use an acute accent (´) to simultaneously indicate primary stress and quantity (of vowels, in the first place). The acute accent is not merely used in bracketed transcriptions, but also in entry headwords. Since in Swedish, quantity and stress are linked together, and vowel and consonant length are in complementary distribution, this system is economical and operational as far as purely Swedish pronunciation is concerned. The accent sign is placed after the letter(s) representing the long sound, e.g. kaja’k, kon’jak, pollett’, thus eliminating the problem of syllabification. However, when it comes to rendering pronunciation of more genuinely foreign words, the system proves to be less suitable.

### Table 2. Phonetic transcriptions of Fontainebleau in the Swedish encyclopedias Nordisk Familjebok (NF), Svensk Uppslagsbok (SvU), Nationalencyklopedin (NE), Bertmarks Respons (BR) and Bonniers Lexikon (BL). Years of publication in parentheses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Transcription</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NF (1876–99)</td>
<td>[få̃tänblå]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NF (1904–26)</td>
<td>[fon̩tänöblå]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SvU (1947–55)</td>
<td>[få̃tänblå]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NE (1989–96)</td>
<td>[fotenblo]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BR (1997–8)</td>
<td>[fotenblö]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BL (1993–8)</td>
<td>[fotenblo]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 3. Phonetic transcriptions of Michelangelo in the same works as in Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Transcription</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NF (1876–99)</td>
<td>mikela’ndjelo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NF (1904–26)</td>
<td>mikela’ndjelå</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SvU (1947–55)</td>
<td>mikelanʃelå</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NE (1989–96)</td>
<td>mikela’ndʒelo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BR (1997–8)</td>
<td>mikeləndʒelo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BL (1993–8)</td>
<td>mikelandʒelo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition, Den Store Danske Encyklopædi (1994–2001) provides [mik’e’landʒelo]—in its notation based on the Dania system—as an Italian pronunciation but in the other case just inserts an IPA stress mark in the headword: Fontaine’bleau; seemingly, a certain familiarity with French pronunciation is expected from the users of this Danish 20-volume work.
Should prosodic features other than stress be rendered?

Prosodic features other than stress, like accent 1 and 2 in Swedish and its equivalents in Norwegian, or the Danish stød, are seldom rendered in the notations of general reference books. The reason for this may be twofold: the phenomena mentioned are of minor importance for understanding an utterance, and their realization and geographical spread vary widely. However, for entries in Standard Chinese, it would be quite feasible for a vast encyclopedia to supply the four tones, as does for example Duden Ausprachewörterbuch in its later editions.

Optimizing notations

Due to lack of space, a single-volume sports dictionary cannot go into detail about pronunciation in the way a full-fledged encyclopedia can. Neither is it likely that its users are willing to address themselves to a complicated system in order to explore the minute details of a word’s pronunciation.

How narrow should a transcription be?

An encyclopedia, in contrast to a language dictionary, might contain words from a great number of languages; for practical reasons, a common notation system must be used. Ideally, this should be capable of conveying a phonemic rendering of all the languages. This creates a dilemma: if the transcription system is made too narrow in order to fulfil the needs of one language, in others it will necessitate irrelevant choices between allophones.

Range of individual phonetic symbols

A compromise solution of the problem mentioned would be to widen the range assigned to each phonetic symbol and use the signs somewhat differently for transcribing different languages. This requires some well-chosen examples in the introduction chapter but should be a viable way of obtaining reasonably good transcriptions of many of the original languages.

An alternative way would be to show respelled pronunciations, in analogy with those often found in U.S. reference works, even extensive ones. However, as mentioned above, the linguistic situation in Sweden is quite different from that in the United States, where strongly anglicized pronunciations of almost all foreign words are widely accepted.

Respelled pronunciations

Interesting examples of respelled pronunciations are found in Olausson and Sangster (2006) and its predecessor, BBC Pronunciation dictionary of British names (1983). Here, the respelling systems are more condensed than its U.S. counterparts and are presented together with IPA transcriptions. This allows for convenient use by a wide range of people. The respelled pronunciations convey a rather anglicized version; the IPA transcriptions, aimed primarily at users familiar with foreign languages, are more true to the languages of origin, though still somewhat anglicized.

Audio pronunciations

Encyclopedias that are web-based or on CD or DVD often offer users audio pronunciations (sound recordings of read entry headwords) as a complement to phonetic transcriptions. The production of such recordings bring some of the above issues to a head.

What languages to record?

It often proves practically impossible to make recordings in all languages figuring among the headwords of an extensive encyclopedia. Either a limited number of languages can be chosen for recordings by native speakers, or—if adapted, e.g. swedishized, pronunciation is used—a lot of languages, though rarely all, can be handled by one or two speakers.

How to choose speakers?

Whether native or domestic speakers are to be used, selecting them is a delicate task. Besides linguistic skill and suitable voice, speaking style and age have to be taken into account. Even though a certain variation is desirable, the speakers must not be too disparate.

Coaching of speakers

When recording in a studio, speakers reading lists of words tend to use a prosody that reveals that they are—exactly!—reading a list, disregarding the fact that users will listen to each word as an isolated one. Coaching by a trained phonetician is advisable.

Conclusion

One of the main concerns of the editorial staff of an encyclopedia or other reference book is putting itself in the place of the notional users.
This applies not least to pronunciation editors and others responsible for displaying pronunciation. Hopefully, this survey—once completed—will make for useful and easily accessible pronunciation data to all those curious in search for it.

References