Controversy and epistolary mediation in the construction of phonetic knowledge

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Abstract

As scientific knowledge grows, it often engenders controversy. The aim of the particular case of controversy studied here, in a series of letters exchanged between two phoneticians, is to capture vacillations of a discipline (phonetics) and its “actants” (phoneticians and their equipment), described at a key moment in the history of the discipline (an historical “turning point”), i.e. when phonetic knowledge was still governed by what one might call a “scientific regime of uncertainty”.

Introduction

If we agree to the following issues: that scientific knowledge is plural in the sense that its construction depends on many heterogeneous conditions (individual, social, historical and discursive), that it develops in fields of research where ideas and specific facts, relationships and decision making are changing constantly and rapidly, that it is built by groups interacting by means of persuasive academic language; in brief, that scientific knowledge is embodied cognition, situated rhetoric and disciplinary doxa (Gärdenfors, 2008, Latour & Woolgard, 1986, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1988, Rosengren, 2003), it is in this case easy to understand that controversy is embedded in its construction (Latour, 2005).

As scientific knowledge grows, it often engenders controversy presented as abstract and impersonal rhetoric forming confrontational articles in scientific journals. Paradoxically these polemic exchanges reveal a desire, beyond the controversy, to establish a consensus among researchers belonging to the same scientific community (Hunston, 2005). Controversy can thus be seen as making science. Its solution imposes inevitably a choice of orientation in knowledge - a paradigm - to the detriment of other orientations (for an example in phonetics, see Grossetti & Boe, 2008).

In parallel to conflicting research articles published in academic journals, there is another medium through which scientific knowledge may be communicated. It is of a more private order, namely the correspondence between scientists. The aim of the particular case of controversy and epistolary mediation studied here is to capture vacillations of a discipline (phonetics) and its “actants” (phoneticians and their equipment), described at a key moment in the history of the discipline (an historical “turning point”), i.e. when phonetic knowledge was still governed by what one might call a “scientific regime of uncertainty”. This study is part of a larger ongoing research initiative on the history of phonetic knowledge in Sweden (Touati, 2009, 2010a, 2010b).

A case of epistolary mediation, controversy and phonetic knowledge

In its singularity as a case study, the controversy studied here is placed precisely both on a spatial and a temporal axis constituted by a series of letters exchanged between two individuals, one member of the Department of Phonetics, Lund University (Sweden), and the other of the Institute of Phonetics belonging to the Université Libre de Bruxelles (Belgium). The temporal lap is the spring term of 1968 (January 22 to May 31). The role of writer-mediator was taken by one of the emblematic figures of Swedish phonetics, Bertil Malmberg (1913-1994), holder of the first chair in phonetics at Lund University in Sweden (see Touati, 2010a). The role of writer-requesting mediation was occupied by a phonetician at the time still a doctoral student, but who was to become one of the great managers of modern instrumental phonetics in
Belgium and Europe, Max Wajskop [1932-1993].

The controversy concentrated on Wajskop’s choice of doctoral project in phonetics. Controversy generally admits a triadic structure (Lemieux, 2007: 195) in terms of number of its institutional actors. Here, this triadic structure was composed by the “Romanists”, the PhD student Wajskop and the mediator, Malmberg. Its scriptural representation is nevertheless dual: the “Romanists” are not part taking directly; the corpus studied here contains no letter from them. Nonetheless, their point of view is heard through reported speech. It is indeed Wajskop who gave them a voice as he described their position in a letter to Malmberg. Divergences of views are expressed by staging several voices in the scriptural space constituted by the letter. As a matter of fact, polyphony is one of the most original features of this controversy. Another peculiarity is that it proceeded by lens publication of the “final” product (a thesis).

Wajskop’s choice concerned more than two projects, it involved two different manners of interpreting phonetics as an academic discipline; it touched changes in the phonetic research paradigm such as it was to manifest itself in the late 60s and early 70s when phonetics was gradually transformed into a speech science.

Analysis of the correspondence between Malmberg and Wajskop

As part of his institutional responsibilities, Malmberg sent and received a considerable number of letters. Letters to and from Malmberg are preserved in original and carbon copy in the archives of Lund University.

The corpus reviewed here consists of a set of seven typed letters (some with margin additions and attachments):

Letter 1. From Bertil Malmberg (henceforth BM) to Max Wajskop (henceforth MW) dated January 22, 1968
Letter 2. From MW to BM dated February 26, 1968 (with attachments, the “Projects A vs. B”)
Letter 3. From MW to BM dated March 8, 1968
Letter 4. From MW to BM dated March 24, 1968
Letter 5. From MW to BM dated April 10, 1968
Letter 6. From MW to BM dated April 12, 1968
Letter 7. From MW to BM dated May 31, 1968

The analytical approach I have chosen to exploit here is close to what Pontille (2003: 57) refers to as a “hermeneutic approach, looking for meaningful interpretations of statements.” I will present an interpretive movement aiming to highlight how changes in theoretical and experimental phonetics are captured by the content of the letters (for other interpretative moves, see Touati 2010b).

Letter 1: The contact. This letter opens with an interactive life story where Malmberg puts himself on stage: “Dear friend, / Looking through my Parisian papers the other day, I found your manuscript ‘Identification de voyelles en fonction de leur durée’ the existence of which had eluded me. This is inexcusable given the interest of your experiments, but I explain it to myself by the disturbances caused with my final departure from Paris, by my numerous trips (to Le Médi, Bucharest, Prague, Kiel, Paris, Lyon, Helsinki) and by the administrative tasks that were assigned to me by the central university authorities during last months”.[...

In the second paragraph of the letter, Malmberg endorses the part of publisher of Studia Linguistica: “I guess that you gave me the manuscript during my visit to Brussels, but for what purpose? Only for me to read (which was worthwhile in itself) or for publication in Studia Linguistica? If your intention was the latter, send me a note and I’d be happy to insert it (rather quickly I think). Otherwise I would be glad to know if the article has already been published”.

Malmberg ended his letter with a positive evaluation of the experimental work done by Wajskop.

Letter 2: The controversy. To Malmberg’s request, polite and flattering in its assessment, Wajskop, after the long silence of 35 days, answers by issuing a request, which came close to a call for help: “My dear Maître, / [...] I will present you a distressing problem”. In fact, Wajskop had a problem with his thesis. The faculty imposed a deadline for him to defend his thesis that was strictly impossible to respect given the work still to be done (“recordings, trip to Paris, analyses with Sona-Graph, calculations [...]”).

The only possible solution would have been for Wajskop to work out a less “ambitious” project thesis, the so-called “Project B” which he entitled “Perception des vocoides oraux en français”; the format of this project was more consistent with what was required in experimental disciplines; it was supported by experimental phoneticians such as Lane, Bertelson and Fry. Modern languages exponents of traditional phonetics, the so-called “Romanists” supported the heavier “Project
A” entitled “Détection et identification des voyelles françaises orales et indice (sic) perceptifs (ou perception) de l’accent dit d’intensité” adding a second part to the core experiment.

Obviously these two projects catalyzed an opposition between researchers coming from different disciplines and traditions. The terms “vowels” vs “vocoids” included in the proposed titles capture quite symptomatically this opposition. Because he found himself in an impossible situation, Wajskop decided to plea for Malmberg as mediator.

Letter 3: The mediation. Malmberg’ response was prompt. It is categorical. “Project B” was not only more than enough to constitute a thesis but it addressed a central issue: “[...] What is something more central and more essential for linguistics than the study of how we perceive acoustic stimuli carrying meaning? [...] Don’t we know that it is around these issues - the relationship between stimulus and linguistic perception - that efforts of phoneticians-linguists are focusing at the moment? [...]”. Malmberg inflicts a blow on the Romanists by stating: “[...] If you add a chapter on stress accent to your main subject, it will lengthen your book unnecessarily. [...] Someone who considers the perception of vocoids as insufficient as a study object reveals his ignorance [sic] in this research field. Instead, it would rather be tempting to say that it is too broad. I pity you if you depend on teachers from the old school. [...]”. Aware of the implications of his stance in favor of Wajskop and modern phonetics, Malmberg did not hesitate to let controversy pass on the public domain (institutional). In a postscript, which, due to its scope and argumentative effect, is impossible not to consider as an “epistolary trope”, he adds: “PS. Feel free to show this letter to everyone who will be involved in the case”.

Letter 4: Effects of mediation. Letter 4 opened immediately on the effects caused by the position taken by Malmberg: “I tell you that your letter has the effect of a bomb, at least on two members of the jury and on myself.” Wajskop was not yet quite reassured. Indeed, once again, he asked Malmberg to intervene directly and adress “Mr. Leroy” (rector at the Institute of Phonetics in Brussels) in order to abolish all frear. Malmberg took action on the occasion of a trip to Paris where he had met Leroy (Letter 5 and Letter 6).

At the end of his letter, Wajskop provides a picture of his life as phonetician in a series of mini-narratives. He related how he had attended two conferences given by Harlan Lane (on speech perception and production, and on the motor theory of speech perception). Wajskop takes the opportunity to describe in detail a clever experimental device presented by Harlan (see Touati, 2010b). He also mentions his collaboration with the group “Analyse-Synthèse de la Parole” from Grenoble (Lancia, Carré et Paillé); with whom he conducted an experiment about F0 influence on synthetic vowel intelligibility.

Clearly Wajskop aimed to strengthen his ethos, partially undermined by his request for mediation. He would like to present himself as a phonetician, not only participating and taking a position in the theoretical debate on speech perception but also able to make a personal contribution.

Letter 5: a pleased mediator. Letter 5 took the concise format of a bulletin of victory: “I am very pleased that my letter has had the desired effect and I compliment you for your achievement.” Obviously, Malmberg was delighted with the effect of his mediation. The letter displays the ethos of a mediator aware and fulfilled with his success. In this letter, Malmberg changes the status of his relationship with Wajskop, now in terms of a relationship between a supervisor and his PhD student: “I look forward to read your first chapters. Wishing you good luck [...]”, whereby he puts an end to his mediation.

Correspondence between the two phoneticians concludes with two short letters, both addressed by Wajskop to Malmberg. One serves as an epilogue while the other captures events of May 68.

This correspondence reveals that Wajskop, unlike institutional players around him, had perfectly understood that a new paradigm for research in phonetics, primarily concerned with speech perception and instrumental analysis, was about to take shape. At the Institute of Phonetics in Brussels, there was a fundamental disagreement between those who advocated phonetics as an old academic discipline and those who promoted phonetics as a new territory for speech research. This fundamental disagreement lead to controversy crystallized in a seemingly minor issue such as the choice of a thesis topic. Malmberg resolved this controversy by brilliant and drastic mediation.
How could he understand the value of fighting for such a thing?

As head of an institute located at the forefront of research in phonetics since 1950, as president of the International Society of Phonetic Sciences since 1961 and as a publisher and founding editor of Studia Linguistica since 1947, Malmberg understood immediately the value of the thesis project preferred by Wajskop. In his mediation, Malmberg did not hesitate to use its ethos - his authority as phonetician - to tip the balance in favor of a thesis topic coherent with experimental phonetics. Following his appointment to the first chair of phonetics in Sweden in 1950, Malmberg worked to develop phonetics as an academic discipline with advanced research in the field. He achieved this goal, not only within his own institute at Lund University, but throughout Sweden at different departments of phonetics and from the present article, on the European scene as well.

Conclusion

In their layered textual format, the letters exchanged between Bertil Malmberg and Max Wajskop during spring of 1968 were used to combine statements about empirical and theoretical knowledge in phonetics with metadiscursive comments about the conditions for formulation of this knowledge. These letters consequently functioned not only as setting for interchange of information and formulation of life narratives but also as a forum for unpublished mediation of and resolution to scientific controversies. Exchange of letters offered, thus, an interactive space for scientific reflexivity.

References


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1 Translation PT.

2 In 1968, the institutionalization process for establishing phonetics in Sweden as an academic discipline reached a peak with dissertations and positions established for phoneticians such as Kerstin Hadding-Koch, Claes-Christan Elert, Björn Lindblom and Sven Öhman. Bertil Malmberg was often required as an expert.