

Phonetic descriptions of “primitive” languages: What do we learn from history?

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In this talk we examine common motifs in the accounts of the sound systems of Iroquoian, Polynesian and Khoisan languages as examples of specific complexity in phonetic inventories. Based on examples from European and American scholarship between the 17th and early 20th century we demonstrate recurring misconceptions in the description of consonant inventories, phonotactic structures as well as intra- and inter-speaker variation and change. In particular, we investigate facts and misinterpretations in the description of seemingly “exotic” components of their sound systems when viewed from the perspective of more well-known languages, and discuss the implications of these accounts for the history of phonetic studies and linguistics in general. Further, we examine their influence on the interpretation of other components of language and their role in the construction of a biased image of the languages and their speakers. Finally, we demonstrate a complex continuity in the history of phonetics by showing that such controversies remain relevant and at least partially unresolved in modern phonetic research, e.g., the concepts of naturalness and complexity of phonological systems as well as their interdependence and parametrization. In fact, notions which are often regarded as “ghosts of the past” have re-emerged as unresolved research questions, as demonstrated by the status of clicks as the rarest type of consonants and of small and large consonant inventories as examples of extremes in phonological complexity.