

**THE SOUND PATTERN
OF ENGLISH**

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To Roman Jakobson

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PREFACE TO THE PAPERBACK EDITION

In the preface to the original edition of this book we remarked that no treatment "that we have proposed has survived a course of lectures unchanged and we do not doubt that the same fate awaits the grammatical sketch that we develop here." While our record as prophets is in general rather unimpressive, in the present instance we were right on the money: few of the matters treated in this 1968 book have remained unaffected by the developments in phonology that have taken place in the past twenty years. In the light of this the question inevitably arises as to what reasons, other than vanity, cupidity, and/or lack of critical judgment on the part of the authors or our publisher, might justify reprinting this book at this time. Our answer is that while the solutions to many particular problems proposed in SPE are out of date, many of the theoretical issues raised there remain critical to phonology to this day, and in quite a number of instances the solutions proposed in SPE have yet to be improved upon. Moreover, there are few works in phonology that have quite the scope of SPE: it deals both with matters of broad theoretical importance as well as with numerous questions of detail; it attempts to contribute to the theoretical foundations of phonetics as well as of phonology and it embeds its central empirical topic—the phonology of modern English (General American)—on the one hand, in a discussion of parallel phenomena in other languages, and on the other hand, in an account of the historical evolution of the English vowel system.

It is for these reasons, we believe, that SPE remains—and will for some time in the future remain—a book that students of phonology should find worth reading and pondering and arguing with. And the existence of a potential audience of this kind justifies the reprinting of the book at this time.

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AUGUST 1990

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PREFACE

This study of English sound structure is an interim report on work in progress rather than an attempt to present a definitive and exhaustive study of phonological processes in English. We feel that our work in this area has reached a point where the general outlines and major theoretical principles are fairly clear and where we can identify the areas requiring additional intensive study with a reasonable expectation that further investigation within the same general framework will not significantly alter the overall picture we have presented, although it may well be that new and different insights—perhaps along the lines discussed in Chapter Nine—will lead to significant modifications. We have decided to publish this study in its present intermediate stage in the hope that it will stimulate criticism and discussion of basic issues and perhaps involve other investigators in the immense task of extending this sketch to the whole of English, providing the same sort of description for other languages, and enriching and sharpening (and, no doubt, revising in many ways) the phonological theory on which it is based.

This book is organized in the following way. Part I opens with an introductory chapter, Chapter One, in which background assumptions are briefly sketched. In Chapter Two of Part I our major conclusions with respect to phonological theory and the phonology of English are outlined. Also discussed are the possible implications of this work with regard to perceptual processes and the conditions under which knowledge of a language (and, presumably, knowledge of other sorts) can be acquired. We have tried in Part I to present an informal account of the main conclusions that we reach and to illustrate the kinds of data that support them. Thus, readers interested only in general conclusions may wish to read no further.

Part II of the book is an elaboration of the topics treated in Chapter Two of Part I. Chapters Three and Four examine in considerable detail two aspects of English sound structure which were only sketched in Chapter Two. In the course of this detailed investigation of English sound patterns and their underlying structure, certain rules of English phonology are developed. These rules are restated in Chapter Five, which concludes Part Two. The primary emphasis in Part II is on the phonology of English; theory is developed informally as needed for the exposition and analysis.

Part III deals with certain aspects of the historical evolution of the sound patterns revealed in the synchronic study in Part II.

Part IV is devoted to phonological theory. The informal discussion in Part I is expanded upon, and the theory presented in an ad hoc manner in Part II is systematically