Introduction

At the turn of the Twenty-first Century, could there be anything less necessary than another book on German phonology? Nearly one hundred years of constant development of phonological theory and careful research on this major European language should have settled all problems and open questions decades ago, considering the fact that people like Leonard Bloomfield, Otto von Essen, Roman Jakobson, Paul Kiparsky, Nikolaj Trubetzkoy, Theo Vennemann and Arnold Zwicky have contributed to this subject, not to mention the countless M.A. and Ph.D. dissertations which have picked up major or minor aspects of German phonology. Still, in spite of the contributions of all these illustrious scholars, there is no common agreement on even the most basic questions, such as:

- Is [ŋ] a phoneme of German or a conditioned variant of /n/?
- Is German word-stress predominantly on the first syllable or on the penultimate?
- Is German umlaut a phonological or morphological phenomenon?
- Is schwa [ə] a phoneme on its own, a variant of /e/, or a predictable epenthetic vowel?

It is in this situation that Richard Wiese submits the second edition of *The Phonology of German*, and his effort is by no means an unnecessary one.

Outline

Wiese’s book is tidily structured into nine chapters. After a short introduction (Chapter 1), there follows an overview of the phoneme inventory of German (Chapter 2). Initially, I found this chapter rather disappointing, because the inventory includes every sound that has ever been postulated as a phoneme of German. It soon develops, however, that this apparent lack of focus is intended, because it highlights several problems that every phonologist needs to deal with when describing a language. In the following chapters Wiese attacks one problem after another, mostly presenting quite satisfying solutions based on a sound phonological framework. This begins in the third chapter, in which Wiese explores the prosodic units of German, carefully
justifying the need for describing the syllable, the foot, the phonological word, the phonological phrase, and the intonational phrase. All these units are needed to describe various morphological processes of German. The fourth chapter provides a few applications of this prosodic hierarchy and its effects on word formation. Also a first approach on schwa-epenthesis is given.

The fifth chapter is a special benefit for any reader not familiar with Lexical Phonology, since a concise introduction is provided to this framework, which the author uses throughout the book. The model is applied to a few more problems of German morphology (if you ever wanted to know about the use of *Fugenmorpheme* in German compounding, you will find that even Lexical Phonology does not provide a satisfying description; there probably is none of a purely phonological nature).

The sixth chapter finally reveals Wiese’s set of phonemes for German, providing extensive feature charts following the Underspecification model (another phonological framework that is conveniently introduced to the reader). Chapter 7 deals with the rules of German phonology, starting from umlaut, going over final devoicing and dorsal fricative assimilation. All the well-known processes of German phonology are treated very carefully, following the two already mentioned models, Lexical Phonology supported by Underspecification. The next chapter describes the assignment of stress on the various levels of the phonological hierarchy, making use of the units introduced in Chapter 3. The last chapter briefly addresses a few general questions, such as how to separate phonetics from phonology (and the extent to which this is possible).

The paperback edition of 2000 comes along with a short postscript, acknowledging that phonological theory has taken a major leap since the publication of the first edition by developing Optimality Theory. Wiese gives a short outline on how some of the described phenomena might receive a different treatment in OT, supplying as a special benefit to the reader a (very) short introduction to this new development.

**Some Observations**

My impression of *The Phonology of German* is a very positive one. It gives a readable and clear treatment of the subject. I especially appreciate the author’s willingness to stick out his neck by sometimes providing new solutions to old problems. In general, Wiese uses a wide range of data, resisting the temptation to leave out words that do not fit his hypotheses. I am surprised by some of the data he permits, some of which I would probably have rejected as foreign words (like *Khmer* and *Myom*) or marginal (like *Schkeuditz* and *Struwwelpeter*). Wiese makes an honest attempt to include the full bandwidth of German language use, which does not always make it easy to come to valid generalizations. Wiese also honestly admits when there are residual problems and counterexamples. Likewise he always admits the possibility of differing analyses, outlining how they might work, even if he does not agree with them. This honest approach is something to be emulated by all who deal with a subject as elusive as language, and deserves sincere appreciation.

Naturally, Wiese provides many analyses where I (who have my own opinion about the phonology of my mother tongue) have widely differing points of view. This is not the place to go
into any detail, since these differing views are of no consequence to the overall value of the book. One major flaw is a formal one, and I did not even notice it for a long time, being proficient in German myself. For all those for whom German is a foreign (and even unknown) language, Wiese’s book will be quite inconvenient. For most examples he does not provide any translations, trusting that the reader would refer to the nearly complete word index in the appendix of the book. For someone who wants to read and understand what is going on, this constant page-turning is most unsatisfactory. In many cases I think that even interlinear translations would have been very helpful.

Apart from the word index the book also comes with a subject index and a complete list of bibliographic references. All these appendices are flawless and very helpful. Another helpful feature is that in his use of formal models, Wiese gives his readers all they need to know to understand what is going on, assuming that they have never heard of Lexical Phonology, Underspecification, and Optimality Theory.

**Why should a field linguist read this book?**

I would like to close with a word about the usefulness of a book on a major European language to field linguists.

In general, when one wants to write up a phonology, it is useful to read phonologies of other languages, just to know how they look like and to get ideas for structuring one’s own work. I suspect that Wiese’s structure would not serve well for a first phonology write-up of a language, and something much shorter is in order. But it gives an idea of what ground needs to be covered. Even more, from Wiese’s book one might take some good ideas on how to deal with some of the problems in one’s research on a language. For instance: For German syllable structure to make sense, Wiese suggests that what many consider as sequences of /ʃ/ and /t/ or /ʃ/ and /p/ are actually not to be treated as sequences, but single segments, like affricates. He calls them “suffricates.” The details of analysis are not likely to be transferable, but the creative approach to the data is inspiring. Maybe an approach like this could solve a problem in the language you are studying? This and many other interesting ideas worth pursuing are found in *The Phonology of German*. I was stimulated more than once to follow up on some new ideas for Awngi phonology.

Finally, Wiese’s book illustrates the dangers of using a formal model to describe a language. As Wiese himself found out between the hardcover and the paperback edition, linguistic models have a tendency to rot. It is good to know them and to let their insights influence your analysis. But when writing it all up, use plain language—no formalisms beyond what will be understandable even two hundred years from now, without requiring the reader to first go through a course in the history of linguistics. But even in his use of formal models, Wiese sets a very good example, in giving the readers all they need to know to interpret the formalisms.

In general, Wiese's book is a good example for a comprehensive phonology treatment of a language, informed by a (nearly) contemporary linguistic model, and it is a goldmine of good ideas which could possibly be applied to many other languages.