

Systems for the Phonetic Transcription of English: Theory and Texts

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Prologue

It is well-known that phonology is a traditionally problematic area in the acquisition of the English language. The imbalance between spelling and pronunciation is so striking to many foreign learners of English that it is a constant source of problems for them; even to native speakers one would be tempted to say, but while the latter have a constant resource to linguistic uses that society continuously creates and sanctions, serving as a permanent guideline to the individual, non-native speakers have to rely basically on textual, written information. The exposure to spoken language is much more fragmentary than in the case of native speakers, something which is aggravated by the existing gap between written and spoken English. In order to circumvent such imbalance observed in English, and in varying degrees in other languages, the International Phonetic Association devised at the beginning of the 20th century a system of symbols known as the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). This system tried to bridge the gap between the oral and the written modes occurring in many languages by representing pronunciation fairly accurately in writing.

In this book we deal with the main models of phonetic/phonemic representation for English. To our knowledge, it is the only publication that covers most of the transcriptional practices found in English (mainly British), and, as such, is a valid document of the evolution of transcription systems since the early 20th Century. What prompted us to write this book was the fact that, although there are textbooks dealing with the transcriptional task, all of them focus on just one system of representation, making no concession to other ways of transcribing sounds. As a result, students of English are led to believe that there is a single or right way of handling the sounds of English, thus reflecting a theoretical stance not always made explicitly to them, and also that other systems are incorrect. Our book, on the contrary, presents a whole array of transcriptional practices, providing answers to apparently different ways of representing sounds

with English. With this knowledge, students and foreign language teachers alike will be in a position to choose the model that better suits their educational needs, for although all transcription systems try to capture the main segmental characteristics in the most objective way, the complex reality, coupled with the specific circumstances, makes some models more appropriate than others.

Besides this ample coverage, the book captures the latest developments in phonetic transcriptions which are not reflected in any textbook available now in the market, such as the representation of sounds in Wells's dictionary (LPD, Longman), Roach et al. (EPD, Cambridge), Upton et al.'s system (OPD, Oxford), SAMPA, and so on. We consider therefore that a book like this is badly needed to fill a gap in the existing literature.

In order to train learners of English as a foreign language – to whom this book is mainly addressed – to transcribe real texts, each transcriptional model is followed by a number of practical exercises following the conventions of the model. Unlike other books on the market, the excerpts used for transcription are oral samples taken randomly from radio and TV broadcasts, reflecting mostly that variety of English known as Standard Southern British (RP and its close variants). Transcription is based therefore on real speech, thus avoiding the danger of representing an idealised norm – a handicap of all transcription based on written texts.

The pedagogical vein can be appreciated in the progressive presentation of the material (from simplified systems of representation to the more complex ones), as well as in the arrangement of the excerpts (from easier samples to more difficult ones). Also – and this is a key differentiating feature as regards other similar textbooks – the set of oral samples used are all transcribed in all the main transcription systems, thus allowing for a quick comparison between them to better appreciate their main differing characteristics. At the theoretical level, the book reflects the latest policy adopted by the International Phonetic Association (1999).

Let me finish by thanking various colleagues from my Department who have helped us one way or another. Special mention is deserved for the commentaries made by professor Francisco Gutiérrez, an enthusiastic collaborator and fine observer of otherwise unnoticed

generalizations made by the authors. My thanks also are to J. Antonio Cutillas for his unselfish collaboration in the transcription of various excerpts. Special thanks go to both J. Windsor Lewis and Clive Upton for their generous help with the phonetic texts representing their own systems; also I would like to acknowledge Jane Setter's enthusiasm and constant encouragement and invaluable help, and my deep thanks to Richard Stibbard for his suggestions and comments on the final draft.

Needless to say, the author is solely responsible for all unnoticed errors.

Murcia, 30 March 2011

1. Phonetic transcription: A brief overview

When in 1888 the Association Phonétique Internationale (API) decided to unify the notational systems in use to represent the oral mode of languages, a long process culminated that goes back to the very moment a disjunction between spelling and pronunciation began to materialise. This mismatch, already present in the Greek as well as the Latin language, was more evident during the Renaissance when the consolidation of various European languages occurred. In the case of France and England, several attempts at reforming their spelling deficiencies (speech was not susceptible of reform) took place, attempts that crystallized during the 19th century in parallel with the great development that took place in disciplines such as phonetics, physiology and acoustical experimentation. It is during this century that Pitman and Ellis tried their hands at creating a universal alphabet to replace ordinary alphabets. They had a triple objective in their minds. In the first place, they intended to drastically reduce the processes of learning how to read; also they aimed to facilitate the acquisition of the English language by foreigners; and thirdly, they attempted to devise a valid system for the teaching of the mother tongue to the deaf and dumb. No doubt the most long-lasting fruits of the work of both authors have been Pitman's invention of a short-hand system still in operation, the creation of an alphabet – *The Phonotype* (1876), – and the publication of phonetic readers for children to use at school. Soon Ellis devised *The Glossic*, an alphabet meant for the teaching of foreign languages, and *The Palaeotype*, whose purpose was to catch different phonetic details both in philological as well as dialectological tasks.

Still in the 19th century, several notational systems arose in Europe which enjoyed great prestige. Amongst them, Lepsius' *Standard Alphabet* was one of the most commonly used by the missionaries at the time of codifying African and Amerindian languages. Like the IPA, with which it was in close competition, this alphabet was based

on the Latin alphabet, completed with other letters and diacritical marks; like the IPA, it lays emphasis on the phonemic principle of using one symbol per phoneme.

Another important contribution to the development of phonetic alphabets was that of Alexander Melville Bell, father of the inventor of the telephone. Bell wrote *Visible Speech, the Science of Universal Alphabets* in 1867 with the idea of teaching the pronunciation of English to native as well as to foreigners, without forgetting speech training for the dumb. He transmitted his interest for the dumb to his son Graham Bell who would set up the *American Association to Promote the Teaching of Speech to the Deaf*. In spite of not being written in Roman notation (i. e. the Latin alphabet), the book exerted a deep influence in the British phonetician H. Sweet who made use of it in the creation of his *Romic Alphabet*, the source of the IPA.

In Europe, the Dane Jespersen devised two types of notation in an attempt to bridge the gap between phonetics and phonology: a system of representation he called 'analphabetic vs. alphabetic notation'. The former, similar in a way to chemical formulations, was conceived of as a complement to the latter, but the complexity of the symbols used and the degree of physiological detail it tries to capture have made it a cumbersome tool, branded by some phoneticians (e. g. Abercrombie, 1967) as a 'mere curiosity'. Henry Sweet continued the alphabetic trend devising two further systems of representation: he first created an *Organic Alphabet* (1906) using iconic notation, which would be soon criticized for its lack of legibility. He also developed broad and narrow versions of the *Romic*, which enjoyed much greater acceptance, the broad variant being the basis on which the first version of the International Phonetics Alphabet was modelled in 1888. This alphabet hinged on two principles of transcription that have been in force since then: a) the respect of the original values of the Latin symbols, and b) the use of a broad type of phonetic representation whenever possible (principle of one symbol per phoneme). Very much concerned with the difficulties the English alphabet presented to native speakers, he also designed a short-hand alphabet to obviate the difficulties traditional alphabets created in the fields of reading and writing.