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Phonetic transcription

From first steps to ear transcription

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Hinweis

Die Lösungen zu den mit @ gekennzeichneten Aufgaben finden Sie unter <http://phonetic-transcription-key.esv.info>

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For Colin Fosskett, who first taught me the principles
of phonetic transcription.

And for Achim Heschel, friend and colleague, who
inspired me to write this book.

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Foreword

There are many excellent textbooks on the phonetics and phonology of English. They range from practical pronunciation guides to highly abstract theoretical treatises. This book is not meant to replace but to supplement them and to assist students of English linguistics in an area they tend to find particularly difficult: phonetic transcription. Its aim is to familiarise learners with the principles of transcribing and, by giving many tips and providing numerous exercises, help them become proficient in this skill.

This book, however, is meant to be more than just an exercise book for one class. Its division into the three practical ‘sections’ A, B and C (rather than chapters) implies that each part is quite self-contained and covers material that may be relevant at different stages of your university course. Thus, the book is meant to be a companion throughout your life as an undergraduate or even graduate student.

Before we turn to the more practical aspects of transcription, however, we start by looking at some of its foundations. These include, among other things, the purpose of transcription (why do we need transcription at all?) and its subject (what is it that we transcribe?), the relationship of spelling and sound, and a short discussion of the reference varieties used (this book covers both British and American English). You will find information on where to look for phonetic fonts for your computer and, since having a pronunciation dictionary is essential for students of English, I have also included a brief survey of the most important works available.

The practical sections A-C are each divided into a ‘Background’ and a ‘Practice’ part. The sections follow a general progression from simple to complex, and the prerequisites for each section are quite different. Section A aims at basic transcription competence. The idea is that it can be used by beginners to transcription, for example in introductory courses to linguistics (or even in the advanced classes in secondary schools), if there are more specific phonetic follow-up classes. It only presupposes basic phonetic concepts like place and manner of articulation, lip rounding (for vowels), the difference between voiced and voiceless sounds, and the concepts of the phoneme and the allophone. We start with very frequent and comparatively simple words and disregard phonological processes such as weakening.

Section B is intended for undergraduate classes on English phonetics and phonology. It requires more advanced skills, and it assumes a general understanding of

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phonological processes. In the ‘Background’ part, we discuss questions of transcription depth, transcription conventions and transcription tolerance. We introduce weak forms and the two allophones [i] and [u] (which are also used by most modern dictionaries). In the exercises, more difficult constructions and entire texts will be transcribed.

Section C, finally, is different from the two previous parts in that it goes beyond transcribing abstract standard pronunciations. It provides background information for those who want to transcribe actual speech, and it offers several exercises based on audio material that is freely available on the internet. This section presupposes a more thorough understanding of the workings of phonetics and phonology, especially articulatory phonetics. It is intended to supplement classes on World Englishes, Dialectology, Sociolinguistics etc.

This textbook is designed both for self-study and for practical sessions in class. Most of the exercises have a key in the ‘Key’ section. These exercises are marked with the symbol ‘✓’. The answer section, however, is more than simply the part where the solutions are given. It contains comments that explain special usages, providing some statistical information and pointing out idiosyncratic cases. Most other exercises (those with the symbol ‘@’) are intended for class work. The key to these exercises can be found on the internet pages of Erich Schmidt publishers (www.esv.info).

‘Phonetic Transcription’ is primarily aimed at university students in the German-speaking countries. This is reflected in the words chosen for practice and in the design of some of the exercises. For example, many speakers of German find it difficult to distinguish the dental fricatives (‘th-sounds’) and the alveolar fricatives ([s] vs. [z]) in transcription, and there are special exercises to cater for these problems. Since, however, the transcription result is ultimately the same for everyone, the book can be used by people of any linguistic background. The models we follow in sections A and B are the prestige accent of British English, usually referred to as Received Pronunciation (RP), and General American (GA). Questions that are only relevant for British English are marked ‘RP’; those that solely refer to American pronunciation are labelled ‘GA’. The emphasis in this book is on segmental phonology, i.e. the identification and transcription of individual phonemes and allophones; to a lesser extent, we look at stress and intonation.

The backbone of the words in the exercises, particularly of those in section B, are words I collected over the years from student presentations and oral exams for the simple reason that the students struggled with these words. I have, however, avoided technical or foreign terms that students of English are not likely to come across. Thus you will neither find *Szechwan*, *haemoglobin* or *ichthyophobia* in this book (which may come as a relief). Nor have I included proper nouns that are

not common currency in English departments. But I *have* included both proper nouns (*Thames, Edinburgh, Greenwich* etc.) and technical terms (*diphthong, euphemism* etc.) that students of English encounter and that they find hard to master. Additionally, this book lists a number of words which display unique features of some kind (e.g. words with extraordinary sound-letter correspondences, alternating pronunciations or stress patterns). The texts I have chosen range from informal spoken discourse and jokes to written classical and academic texts, covering a wide variety of material. However, once you have grasped the basic principles of transcribing connected speech (e.g. weak forms, linking), the major problem remains the representation of the difficult words just mentioned, typically words of classical origin, and it is for this reason that these words receive special attention.

Sometimes students find transcription a bit hard to come to terms with. It is my hope that once you have understood the basic ideas and developed some fluency in transcription, you will actually find it quite interesting. I have even known people who started to write postcards or letters to their friends and loved ones in phonetic transcription. In any case, transcription is a useful and indispensable tool for teachers of English and linguists alike.