Holger Schmitt

Phonetic Transcription

**From First Steps
to Ear Transcription**

Grundlagen der Anglistik und Amerikanistik – **35**

2., neu bearbeitete und erweiterte Auflage

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von

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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). Since having a pronunciation dictionary is essential for students of English, I have also included a brief survey of some 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 phonological processes. In the 'Background' part, we discuss questions of tran-

scription 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 for both British and American English. The answer section, however, is more than simply the part where the solutions are given; it also contains comments that explain special usages, providing some statistical information and pointing out idiosyncratic cases.

'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 also look at stress and intonation.

The bulk of the material in the exercises, particularly of those in section B, are words I have 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 correspond-ences, 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.

The second edition has been revised, partially updated and extended. It now in-cludes the key to all relevant exercises in the book (rather than providing the key to some of them online). In addition, there are two new exercises: one on the differences in the stress pattern of related English/German words (A36) and one on the transcription of foreign names (C2).

Foundations of transcription

This section provides you with some background information on transcription. Its aim is to answer questions like "Why do we transcribe speech at all?", "How are sound and spelling related?" and "What is it that we transcribe?". It also gives you a short overview of the history of the International Phonetic Alphabet and some tips on using IPA symbols on your computer. We will take a brief look at some of the pronunciation dictionaries available and then conclude this part by sketching the varieties that we use as a model ('Received Pronunciation' and 'General American'). The question of which symbols we use for each sound is dealt with at the beginning of section A.

Does transcription matter?

Why, as a student of English linguistics, should you learn to transcribe in the first place? There are many good answers to this question, but the following are probably among the most relevant for you:

- On the most basic level, you have to be able to look up the pronunciation of words in pronunciation dictionaries. You cannot afford to (or at least should not) teach English in a school setting or make a presentation in English using words whose pronunciation you are not sure of. This is true for all kinds of words (if, for example, you see the word *yacht* for the first time and don't hear it spoken, you will probably come up with various ideas of how it might be pronounced), but this is particularly true for proper nouns, i.e. names of places or people.

- Transcription skills are not the same as pronunciation skills, and yet the two feed into each other. As you work to master transcription, you develop an awareness of the pronunciation of English in general and the idiosyncrasies of many of its lexemes and their combination in connected speech in particular. If you take that extra step and apply your newly developed understanding to your own pronunciation, you will no doubt benefit from it. Conversely, the more you know about sound patterns and their representations, the more you will be able to distinguish and describe the subtle differences of real language.

- Many linguistic disciplines rely on transcription as an essential tool. The most obvious ones are, of course, phonetics and phonology, but the importance of transcription does not end here. When you study varieties of English, you will

realise that most of the differences between one form of English and another are due to pronunciation. As Mair (2008: 152) puts it, "In our comparison of British and American standard English we were able to observe that, to put it simply, accent divides and syntax and the lexicon unite. This trend is much in evidence when it comes to the new and emerging standards." The same is true for social variation. It is essential to know, for example, that the pronunciation of the word *singing* as [ˈsɪŋɪn], often written as *singin'*, is not caused, as it is commonly described, by 'dropping one's "g"' but by the replacement of the phoneme [ŋ] by another ([n]). In other words, whenever we analyse variation in English, we have to be able to recognise the differences in pronunciation and to describe them. Other areas of linguistics where the representation of pronunciation plays an important role are lexicography, morphology, first and second language acquisition, and many fields of applied linguistics like speech therapy, forensic linguistics, alphabetisation and, of course, language teaching.

- If you are training to be a teacher, you will have to teach transcription in the higher classes of secondary education in some educational systems. If this applies to you, you should have more than a vague idea of how transcription works and how you can pass on this knowledge to others.[1]

As you can see, for linguists and language teachers, transcription is not a luxury, but an important tool, and it pays to develop one's skills in this field to a high standard. If you want to join those who write postcards or letters in phonetic transcript and if you are on very friendly terms with your addressee, you may even employ the phonetic symbol 'ʘ' to finish off your letters. This symbol represents a voiceless bilabial click, a sound that actually exists in some languages. To produce it, close your lips (for our purpose it helps to round them, too), create something like a vacuum behind them and then suddenly release the lips, sucking in air, not into your lungs, but just into your mouth (phoneticians speak of 'velaric ingressive airstream'). What you are forming is … a kiss.

Transcription outside linguistics

Is transcription something that is only relevant for language students and linguists, or do we encounter words or passages transcribed in everyday life, too? The answer is yes to the latter. We do find it in non-philological contexts, and we find it in two different forms. The first one concerns imitations of dictionary entries like the following:

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[1] If you prepare to work as an English teacher, check out my book *Teaching English Pronunciation* (Schmitt 2016).

▌ Many students of English struggle with phonetic transcription. This book is intended as a companion for students from the start of their linguistic training up to graduate or postgraduate level when they may analyse and transcribe authentic speech. It

- covers both British and American English pronunciation,
- offers more than 80 transcription exercises for learners of all levels with a clear progression from simple to challenging,
- provides a wealth of background information and practical tips,
- is exceptional in that it also covers the transcription of actual speech ('ear transcription').

The second edition has been revised, partially updated and extended, with the key now being provided in the book for both British and American pronunciation for all relevant exercises.

"This practical book for students on the techniques of transcription is a welcome addition to the wide range of works that deal with the phonetics of English."

Colin Foskett in *Beiträge zur Fremdsprachenvermittlung*