

Introduction

Transcribing the Sound of English is not so much a coursebook in phonetics nor a textbook on English phonology, but a training course in developing students' powers of observation on features of English pronunciation and their skills in recording them in writing. It begins in a very elementary way but it is thorough, and eventually leads to the most comprehensive coverage of the sounds of English from words to full discourse that is available anywhere. It is designed for both native and non-native speakers of English, and for that latter reason all of the material is available in audio form. Every single word and all the discourses that are presented in *Transcribing the Sound of English* have been recorded and are available at www.cambridge.org/tench. Every single example with a reference number in the left-hand margin of this book is found with that same reference on that website.

If you are new to the subject, start at the beginning of Part I and do Chapters 1, 2 and 3 about transcribing words. You are introduced to broad transcription in a very gentle way, with plenty of practice material – so much, in fact, that a skilful, confident student could actually skip some of it, but there is enough to provide a less confident student with plenty of practice to build up their confidence. There is no key to this practice material, because you cannot go wrong! There are, however, quick tests (**kwik tests**) at strategic points, and for them a key is provided on the same website. By the end of Chapter 3, you should be able to transcribe a word like *homogeneous* without any difficulty.

You could then choose to ignore Chapter 4 if you do not need to get into narrow transcription. You could also ignore Chapter 5 on accents if desired. These two chapters are more advanced and are written in a more academic style. But you could return to them later.

It would be good to do Chapter 6 on phrases, which returns to a more gentle approach in broad transcription. It introduces you to features of pronunciation that may not be immediately obvious when words come together and affect each other. But it only takes a little reflection to see what quite naturally happens in your own ordinary, informal speech.

Part II takes you on from words and phrases to full discourse with its rhythm and intonation systems. Chapter 7 shows the effect of rhythm in utterances, especially in terms of the so-called weak forms of words in context. It is closed with three whole discourses, monologues, which are carefully graded with guidance to help you to listen out for things, but that guidance becomes progressively less explicit until you no longer need it.

Introduction

The final Chapters 8 to 12 on intonation are a thorough and comprehensive introduction to transcribing the important features of intonation.

There is a convention that when spoken discourse is transcribed it is done so in ordinary orthography; and this convention is accepted here. It should be noted that much of the spoken data in sociolinguistics literature has very poor systems for recording intonation and its effect in the development of discourse, and these final chapters will gradually introduce you to the intonation systems themselves in real, genuine instances of talk that were recorded for other purposes than intonation transcription. Intonation is there whenever we talk, and it is often the most crucial element in the communication process. So you get to handle intonation in actual talk, not in simulated exercises.

These chapters could be taken as a separate task from the rest of this book. They present a full description of intonation, but they do so in such a way that you build up both your knowledge and your skill in transcription. There are occasional references to new trends which are not always dealt with in textbooks on English intonation. Again, there is an emphasis on intonation in *real* discourse; you will listen to real people talking in real situations, not in simulated exercises.

You will see that the exercises in Chapters 8 to 12 do not have a key. This is because you are introduced to real dialogues where you have to decide on matters of tonality first and then on matters of tonicity and then of tone and paratones. As you move from one chapter to another, the 'key' is given you in every following chapter. So, for example, you are asked to decide on the tonality of dialogues in Chapter 8 before you move on to tonicity in Chapter 9; and when you come to work on tonicity, you will find that the tonality of the dialogue is presented to you, because you cannot really decide on matters of tonicity until the tonality has been recognized. And so it goes on, step by step through to Chapter 12, until you have reached a full and complete analysis and transcription.

So you get the chance to learn and practise and then produce whole transcriptions with confidence, from simple words to whole discourses, all in one workbook!

I Words . . .

Why transcribe?

It is an unfortunate feature of the English language, that the way its words are spelt does not always match the way its words are pronounced, in the simple and systematic way of other languages. For instance, in most accents of English, the letter <a> is not pronounced the same in the two words *tall* and *tally*; and although the two words *tally* and *ally* are spelt alike, they are not pronounced alike – they do not rhyme. There are, in fact, two sides to this mismatching of spelling and pronunciation: a single vowel letter of the alphabet can represent at least two vowel sounds; and a single vowel sound can be represented by at least two different spellings. Another example is the double <o> in *brood* and *brook* – two different vowel sounds, but the same spelling; and *brood* (what birds do) and *brewed* (past tense of the verb *brew*) – two different spellings, but the same vowel sound. In fact, it is not too difficult to think of ten ways of pronouncing the use of the letter <a> in spelling, and ten ways of pronouncing each of the other vowel **letters**. Equally, it is not too difficult to think of ten ways of spelling most of the vowel **sounds**. This represents an enormous task for a child learning to read and write in English as their mother tongue, and similarly, a tricky task for those who learn English as an additional language.

This mismatching is found amongst consonants too. The letter <t> in *rat* and *ration* represent very different consonant sounds; double <s> occurs in both *pass* and *passion*, but whereas *passion* and *ration* rhyme, their identical ‘sh’ sound is spelt differently. Have you noticed that the first double <s> in the word *possess* is pronounced differently from its second double <s>, and that the second double <s> of the word *possession* is different again? The variation amongst consonant letters and consonant sounds is not as great and as mystifying as it is amongst vowel letters and sounds, but it certainly adds to the impression of an unhelpful, perhaps even an unnecessary, complication in the matching up of spelling and pronunciation of words in English. You know, too, that often consonant letters represent nothing in pronunciation, like the in *debt*, the <c> in *muscle*, the <d> in *handkerchief*, etc. But there is also the case of a consonant sound not being spelt at all: if you compare the pronunciation of the beginning of the two words *youthful* and *useful*, you will notice that the ‘y’ sound is spelt with the letter <y> in the first word, but is not spelt at all

PART ONE *Words*

in the second; compare *view* and *few* too, where the ‘y’ sound is spelt with the letter <i> in *view*, but not in *few*.

Thus it is no wonder that learners have problems with English spelling and with deducing the pronunciation of words from their written form. These problems persist into later life and even well-educated professional people make many mistakes. So it is also no wonder that professionals in education have sought to remedy the situation by various means, including proposals for spelling reform on the one hand, and special reading schemes like phonics and the phonographic method on the other. But what is needed is an understanding of the very pronunciation system of English itself which the spelling system obscures. This need is met in the application of linguistics, or, more precisely, in those parts of linguistics known as phonology and phonetics. Phonology refers to pronunciation as a system in itself – how many vowels there are in the spoken form of the language (not the five vowel letters), and how many consonants there are, where the sounds can occur in words, what combination of sounds are allowed, etc. Phonetics refers to the pronunciation of the sounds themselves – how they are made, how they differ, how they sound in different positions of a word and how they sound in different combinations, etc. And for the study of the pronunciation of words in English, an extra set of symbols is needed to extend the use of the letters of the alphabet.

The use of such phonetic symbols, as they are usually called, facilitates the representation of the pronunciation of any language, not just those which have a ‘difficult’ relationship with spelling like English, French, Irish, etc. Even if there is a good correspondence between pronunciation and spelling as in languages like Spanish, Welsh, Finnish, etc., an international set of symbols is helpful in comparing languages and learning them. As you make your way through this workbook, you will also see that detailed differences can be represented when transcribing different accents and colloquial styles.

The ‘angle’ brackets, <t>, enclose letters of the alphabet. Whole words in ordinary spelling which are used as examples are in *italics*. ‘Slant’ brackets, /t/, enclose phonetic symbols in broad transcription, i.e. phonemes; whole words in broad transcription are also enclosed in ‘slant’ brackets, e.g. /ræt/ *rat*. ‘Square’ brackets, [t], enclose phonetic symbols in narrow transcription, i.e. allophones (see Chapter 4).

Chapters 1 to 3 are based on a type of accent that used to be known as *Received Pronunciation*. But this term is no longer transparent in meaning, and so the more explicit label *Southern England Standard Pronunciation* (SESP) is used. It also used to be known as *BBC English*, but the BBC now has a much more open policy on accents even for their main newsreaders, and of course other channels may well use newsreaders who speak with the SESP. This accent is ‘standard’ simply in the observation that it is recognized as a form of pronunciation that is typically used by those who professionally engage in public speech, people like newsreaders. But a newsreader in Scotland is not likely to use SESP, but a Scottish standard of pronunciation; similarly newsreaders in

Why transcribe?

Wales, Ireland, USA, Canada, etc. are most likely to use standard pronunciations that are appropriate in their settings.

There is no intrinsic ‘value’ in SESP or, for that matter, in General American (GA). However, SESP is the standard form of pronunciation that is presented in most descriptions of English pronunciation published in UK, while GA is the standard form presented in USA. Therefore, for simple practical reasons, SESP has been chosen as a starting point, but with occasional comments on well-known variations in other accents.

1 Vowels

The vowels offer the greatest problem, so we will start there. The vowel system of English is relatively large. Latin had five vowels, hence the five vowel letters in our Roman alphabet; a modern form of Latin, Spanish, has also only five, Italian has seven, but English has at least twenty. Listen to the following English names and note that each has a different vowel sound:

- 1.1 Steve, Jim, Jen, Pat, Mark, John, George, Brook, Sue, Chuck, Bert, Jane, Joe, Di, Joy, Ian, Claire, Noor

That's eighteen different vowel sounds already; then add to those, the two vowel sounds in

Howard,

and the vowels at the beginning of

Fiona and Louise.

And so the relatively large size of the vowel system of English can begin to be appreciated. All these different vowel sounds can be used to distinguish ordinary words too of course, such as

- 1.2 peat, pit, pet, pat, part, pot, port, put, putt, pert, pout . . .

and thus they have a contrastive function. By virtue of this contrastive function, we can be sure that all these vowel sounds are distinct items, or units, in the phonology of English – that is, in English pronunciation as a system. And because they are distinct, linguists need to have a separate symbol for each of them.

The phonetic description of the vowel sounds – that is, the way they are pronounced – helps us to classify them all into groups. There are three important groupings: the short vowels, the long vowels, and the weak vowels. Each will be dealt with in turn, beginning with the six short vowels.

The short vowels

The 6 short vowels can be found in the following words:

- 1.3 lick, leg, lack, lock, look, luck

They have two main features: one is that they are, phonetically, shorter than the other vowels, as we shall see when we introduce the long vowels; the other

CHAPTER 1 *Vowels*

is that they are, phonologically, never able to appear at the end of a word in English – they must always be followed by a consonant. So, by introducing the short vowels first, we shall also have to practise the use of some of the consonant symbols. Some of the letters of the alphabet function also as phonetic symbols, such as b, d, f, g, h, k, l, m, n, p, r, s, t, v, w, z – all with their common English values. (Note that /g/ represents the initial sound in *get*, not that of *gem*.)

The symbols we will use are all authorized by the IPA, the International Phonetic Association, and can be used to represent the sounds of any language in the world. But please note that you must write them as printed, e.g. as /f/, not *f*; as /z/, not *z*, etc.

Now, the first short vowel that we listed was in the word

1.4 lick

that vowel is represented by a symbol that looks like a small capital <I>; **lick is transcribed as**

l ɪ k

Notice that the <ck> at the end of the word represents a single sound, and so only a single phonetic symbol, /k/, is required. Transcribe all these words too that rhyme with *lick* making sure that you write a /k/ all by itself at the end:

1.5 pick, tick, kick, nick, wick, trick, slick, stick

Write them on the line below

One of these words could have been a name –

1.6 Nick

The name *Nick*, and the common noun, *nick*, are pronounced in exactly the same way despite the use of the capital <N>; because they are pronounced the same, they must be transcribed the same: /n ɪ k/. It would be phonetically incorrect to use a capital letter in a name as a phonetic symbol in a case like this. Notice also that the name, Nick, could also be spelt *Nic* or *Nik*, but because this makes no difference to the pronunciation, it makes no difference to the transcription either. So, *nick*, *Nick*, *Nic* and *Nik* are all transcribed as /n ɪ k/. (Because they are pronounced the same, despite their different spellings, the words are called homophones.)

Now, transcribe these other names, making sure you do not use any capital letters as phonetic symbols

1.7 Mick, Dick, Rick, Vic, Tim, Phil

Here are some more words with the same vowel sound, to give you practice with the symbol /ɪ/.

PART ONE *Words*

- 1.8 pip, bib, did, kid, gig, fit, trip, slit, film, trim

And now try these

- 1.9 licks, sticks, kicks, tricks, wicks, slicks

Notice that they rhyme with the following names with apostrophe <'s>:

- 1.10 Nick's, Dick's, Rick's, Vic's, Mick's

The apostrophe must **not** be included in the transcription, because it is **not** pronounced. And notice, too, that

- 1.11 *Mick's* and *mix*

are homophones – they are pronounced the same, and so should be transcribed the same: /mɪks/. Transcribe

- 1.12 six, fix, mix _____

You could also now transcribe the word

- 1.13 quick

using only the symbols introduced so far: /kwɪk/. Try:

- 1.14 quip, quit, quid, quiz, quill, quilt, squint, liquid, quick fix

You could also transcribe the word

- 1.15 knit

noting that the initial <k> is not pronounced and so is not transcribed: /nɪt/ (*knit* and *nit* are homophones). Transcribe the following words in which, in each case, a letter is silent

- 1.16 wrist, biscuit, snippet, ticket, wicket

Remember that /k/ is used whatever the spelling for the /k/ sound; so, *click* is /klɪk/. Then transcribe

- 1.17 crick, cricket, crib, crypt, script, clips, victim

- 1.18 Vic prints Nik's scripts _____

- 1.19 Kim nicks Philip's biscuits _____

CHAPTER 1 *Vowels*

1.20 Six miss Rick's film _____

In this practice with the first short vowel, we have also actually illustrated a number of rules of good transcriptional practice:

- 1 A unit of sound in the phonological system of a language (known technically as a phoneme) must be represented by a single symbol, whatever variations may occur in spelling; e.g. <k, c, ck, q(u)> and an element of <x> all represent the one English consonant phoneme /k/.
- 2 Capital letters are not used for English phonemes; since <n> and <N> (etc.) are pronounced identically, they must be represented by a single symbol, e.g. /n/.
- 3 Homophones – pairs (or sets) of words with the same pronunciation despite different spellings – must be transcribed with the same symbols, e.g. *Mick's*, *mix*.
- 4 The apostrophe must not be transcribed, since it is not pronounced: *Mick's* = /m ɪ k s/ ; *Philip's* = /f ɪ l ɪ p s/.
- 5 A single letter may represent two phonemes in transcription; each of those phonemes requires its own symbol; e.g. <x> (in *six*) = /ks/.
- 6 A double letter may represent a single phoneme; in transcription that single phoneme must be represented by a single symbol; e.g. <ss> in *miss* = /m ɪ s/ ; <pp> in *snippet* = /s n ɪ p ɪ t/.
- 7 A letter may be redundant as far as pronunciation is concerned: if a letter represents 'silence', it must not have a corresponding symbol in the transcription of a word, e.g. <w> in *wrist* = /r ɪ s t/.
- 8 Word spaces are retained as in orthography, even when there is no 'space', or silence, in pronunciation. Note that the phrase *snip it* is pronounced identically to the single word *snippet*. However, word spaces are preserved to aid reading: /snɪp ɪt/.

A few more rules will need to be added in due course.

*

The second short vowel that we listed occurred in the word

1.21 leg

That vowel is represented by an IPA symbol that looks like the Greek letter <ε>, (epsilon). So *leg* is transcribed as

l ɛ g

Some dictionaries use the ordinary Roman letter <e>, because it has a more familiar look; however, in IPA, <e> represents the sound in the German word

PART ONE *Words*

1.22 Tee

and the French word *thé*, Dutch *thee*, Welsh *tê*; or in many an English accent a word like *lake*. That vowel sound is distinctly different from the vowel in *leg*. Compare another pair of words: the word *late* in many English accents is pronounced:

1.23 ‘late’

compared to *let*. So, for comparative purposes, when, for instance, comparing the vowels of English and another language, or the vowels of two different accents of English, we need to keep the ordinary Roman letter <e> as the IPA symbol for the /e/ sound, and rely on the Greek letter epsilon, <ɛ>, as the IPA symbol for the /ɛ/ sound. Thus, *egg* is /ɛg/.

Using the symbol /ɛ/, now transcribe

1.24 peg, beg, keg _____

and

1.25 pet, net, debt, well, tent, send, kept, crept, twelve

and the names

1.26 Ben, Greg, Kent, Meg, Rex, Brett _____

The vowel sound /ɛ/ is spelt in various ways including <ea>. Transcribe

1.27 head, dead, dealt, meant _____

and the homophones

1.28 *bread* and *bred*, and *wrecks* and *Rex* _____

Ate, the past tense of *eat*, in a British accent is usually

1.29 /ɛt/

Now transcribe

1.30 *friend* and *said* _____

1.31 Fred kept twelve tents _____

1.32 Ted said ten; Ed meant twelve _____

1.33 Did Meg wed Denis _____

1.34 Meg kept Denis in debt _____

1.35 Did Tim edit Phil’s film script _____

1.36 Ed will edit it _____