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Frequently-asked Questions about phonetic symbols

1. *What is the difference between the symbol [ɑ] and the symbol [ɔ]?*

These symbols represent two different vowels: a low, back, unrounded vowel (“ah”) vs. a mid, back, rounded vowel (often spelled “aw” to show its pronunciation). The name of [ɔ] is 'open o'. The occurrence of these vowels in particular words varies in different regions of America and Canada. Good word pairs for testing whether or not your dialect has one, the other, or both are:

cot - caught

tot - taught

body - bawdy

ah (exclamation of pleasure) - awww (exclamation used for cute or sweet creatures, such as kittens or babies)

Most Western-USA dialects (including California) lack [ɔ]. People speaking such a dialect will hear no difference between the words in these pairs, because they use [ɑ] in both. People from, for example, Toronto, also will hear no difference, because they use [ɔ] in both. Most people from the Northeastern United States, however, especially the Mid-Atlantic states (NY, NJ, DE and surroundings) use [ɑ] in the first column, but [ɔ] in the second column. These speakers will also use [ɔ] for words spelled with “aw” or “au”, for example *lawn, crawl, audit, trauma*, and may do so also for words ending in “og”, such as *dog, hog, log*.

The difference is easy to see. Look in a mirror while you pronounce the above pairs of words, or observe another speaker's mouth closely. [ɑ] involves no lip-rounding, so all you will see is a relatively wide-open mouth with lips relaxed. [ɔ], however, involves slight rounding of the lips — a very loose and open pucker, so to speak. This puts a slight degree of tension in the lips. The mouth opening for [ɔ] is smaller than that for [ɑ].

2. *What is the difference between the symbols [ð] and [θ]?*

The first is voiced, the second voiceless. To figure out which one you need for a particular word, say the word, but lengthen the 'th' sound – hold it for a second or two. While you do this, put your hands over your ears. If you hear a buzzing sound during the 'th', then you need the first symbol, called 'edh'. If you don't, you need the second, called 'theta'. Try this with the following word pairs:

either - ether (pronounce 'either' with the vowel of 'seat')

this - thick

bathe (verb 'to bathe') - bath (noun 'a bath')

In each case, the first word has the voiced 'th'-sound and the second word has the voiceless one.

3. What is the difference between the symbols [ʌ] and [ə]?

The first of these symbols is called 'caret', and looks like an upside-down / v /. The second is called 'schwa'. You will find many textbooks that use the schwa symbol for both sounds, although, technically speaking, they are different from each other. This difference is extremely difficult for most people to hear, so if you don't hear it, don't despair.

The sound represented by [ʌ] generally appears in syllables that are stressed (“accented”), that is, that receive more emphasis than other syllables in the word. [ə] generally appears in syllables that are unstressed, that is, that receive much less emphasis than other syllables in the word. When students transcribe, they often break a word up and give each part equal emphasis, so only [ʌ] will be heard. To hear [ə], you have to say the word at fairly normal speed, not break it up, and give it its normal rhythm (strong/weak emphasis pattern).

Words with [ʌ] (underlined):

sometimes sun love enough

Words with [ə] (underlined):

Samantha enough (when the 'e' is not pronounced like the vowel of 'seat') suppose

4. Why are there alternative symbols for some sounds, for example [ʃ] and [ʃ̺], [ʒ] and [ʒ̺]?

The intent of an International Phonetic Alphabet is to provide a perfect alphabet for all the sounds used in human languages. A perfect alphabet is perfectly consistent – a particular symbol is supposed to correspond to one and only one sound, and each sound is supposed to be represented by a symbol different from all other symbols. The IPA as originally developed is in fact perfect in this way, but in some countries there are slightly different traditions of representing the sounds of the languages of that country. In America, a slightly different tradition of representing certain sounds of English has developed, constituting a departure from the universal IPA. Most American linguistics textbooks use the American system. British, Canadian, and other international books use the universal IPA. You may run into both alphabets in your readings about language, so it is worthwhile to be aware of the variants of particular symbols. The other differences are:

| <u>IPA</u> | <u>Other</u> |
|-------------------|-------------------|
| [tʃ] | [t͡ʃ] |
| [dʒ] | [d͡ʒ] |
| [j] | [y] |
| [ɹ] | [r] |
| [ɔɪ] | [oy <i>or</i> ɔy] |
| [aɪ <i>or</i> aɪ] | [ay] |
| [aʊ] | [aw] |
| [eɪ] | [e] |

5. What differentiates the symbols and [w], [w̥] and [ʍ] from each other?

[w] is the “w” sound in words like *wear* and *away*.

[w̥] and [ɰ] stand for the same sound. It is a whispered /w/, something like 'hw' with the 'h' and the 'w' pronounced simultaneously. Many speakers of American English do not have this sound in their dialect. Those who do use it in words that are spelled with 'wh', such as 'where', 'when', 'which', and 'white' (think 'hwere', 'hwen', 'hwich', 'hwite'). While this is not always tied to a specific region, it is more typical of various parts of the South, central Midwest, and the Pacific Northwest. For such speakers, there will be a pronunciation difference between the words in pairs like 'which, witch' and 'where, wear'. If you pronounce both words in the pair exactly the same, you are not such a speaker and you will not need this symbol for transcribing your speech.

6. What does the vertical line under certain consonants mean - [ɹ̥] [l̥] [ŋ̥] [m̥]?

The line means that the consonant it is under is the nucleus of its syllable – in other words, there is no vowel before the consonant in the rhyme of the syllable. Therefore, you will only need to use this line when there is no vowel in front of the consonant. (The line is never used when the consonant is at the beginning of the word or when it precedes a vowel). Some examples:

bird [bɹ̥d]
little [lɪt̥l̥]
nation [neɪŋ̥]
rhythm [ɹ̥ɪðm̥]

Instances when you would not use the line:

red [ɹ̥ɛd]
brown [bɹ̥aʊn]
beard [biɹ̥d]
more [moɹ̥]

Do you have more questions? E-mail me at jrubba@calpoly.edu.