

How Do I Pronounce These Squiggles? A Crash Course in Reading the International Phonetic Alphabet

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How do you figure out what a language is supposed to sound like, especially if you don't know anyone who can speak it to you?

Happily, language scholars in the last century developed an alphabet of symbols that is designed to bring an objective standard to describing the sounds of language. The International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) is that symbol set, and it is a wonderfully useful tool.

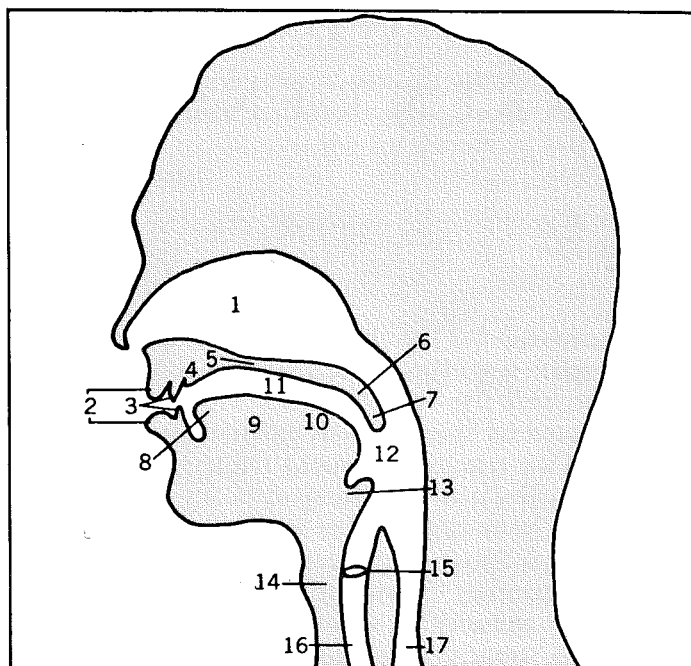
This class is designed to give you a fast overview of the symbol set that is useful for a lot of Western European languages¹; we'll talk about how to describe sounds, and then how to use the IPA as a way to figure out how to pronounce a language.

Some General Vocabulary

- *phone*: a precise, technical term for a single speech sound. We will be talking about two groups of phones – consonants and vowels.
- *voice*: vibration of the vocal cords during the pronunciation of a phone. If you place your fingertips on your larynx, you can feel it vibrate when you pronounce a *voiced* phone (like the “th” in “thy”), but it does not vibrate when you pronounce a *voiceless* phone (like the “th” in “thigh”). Consonants may be voiced or voiceless; vowels are almost always voiced.
- *diphthong*: a sequence of two vowels in the same syllable. Modern American English is extremely diphthong-heavy; many European languages are not so at all.
- *stop*: a sound that is made by blocking airflow entirely, with lips or tongue. Also called a *plosive*.
- *nasal*: a sound that is made by partially blocking airflow, so that air moves through the nose.
- *fricative*: a sound that is made by using the lips, tongue, and/or teeth to force air through a constricted channel.
- *affricate*: a sound that begins like a *stop*, with a blocked airflow, and continues like a *fricative*, with a narrowed channel of air.
- *approximant*: a sound that is made with a narrowed channel, like a *fricative*, but not so narrow and therefore with less hiss...
- *flaps* and *trills*: one or several flips of the tongue against the back of the ridge behind your teeth (the *alveolar ridge*).

¹ To be precise, we'll be focusing on the Germanic, Italic, and Celtic languages; have a look at this family tree of languages to see who's included: <http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/language.html>

Where Do The Sounds Happen?



THE ORGANS OF SPEECH

- | | | |
|-------------------|--------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. Nasal cavity | 7. Uvula | 13. Epiglottis |
| 2. Lips | 8. Tip of tongue | 14. Larynx |
| 3. Teeth | 9. Front of tongue | 15. Vocal cords
and glottis |
| 4. Alveolar ridge | 10. Back of tongue | 16. Trachea |
| 5. Hard palate | 11. Oral cavity | 17. Esophagus |
| 6. Velum | 12. Pharynx | |

- *Labial* phones involve the **lips**. *Bilabial* phones involve **both lips**.
- *Dental* phones involve the **teeth**.
- *Alveolar* phones involve the **alveolar ridge**, the hard ridge just behind your top teeth.
- *Palatal* phones involve the **hard palate**, in the roof of your mouth.
- *Velar* phones involve the **velum**, or **soft palate**, toward the back of the roof of your mouth.
- *Uvular* phones involve the **uvula**, right at the back of the roof of your mouth.
- *Glottal* phones involve the **glottis**, all the way down in your throat.

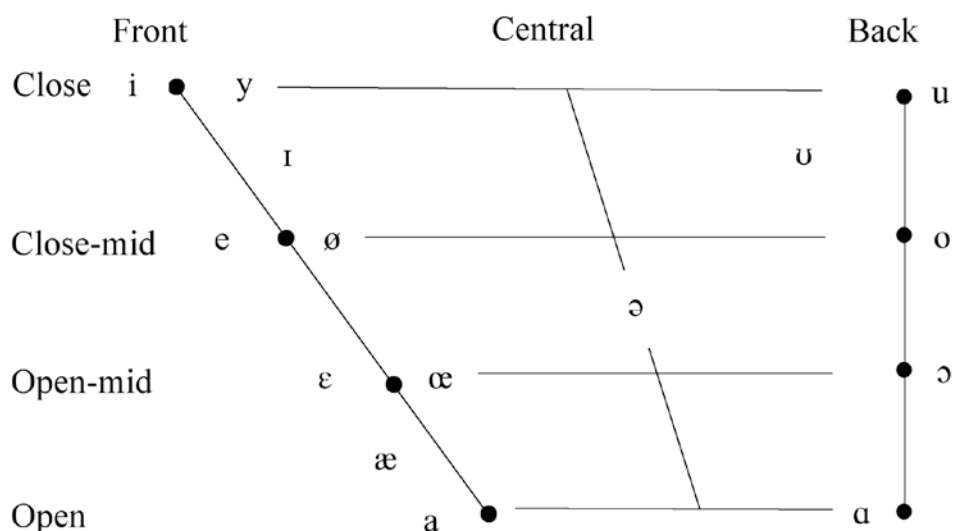
As you practice each phone, pay special attention to where the parts of your mouth are, and how they feel!

Consonants (arranged by where they happen in the mouth)

IPA symbol	Description	Example
Labial		
p	voiceless bilabial stop	pit
b	voiced bilabial stop	bid
m	voiced bilabial nasal	month

Dental		
f	voiceless labiodental fricative	fine
v	voiced labiodental fricative	vine
θ	voiceless interdental fricative	thigh
ð	voiced interdental fricative	thy
Alveolar		
t	voiceless alveolar stop	tip
d	voiced alveolar stop	deed
n	voiced alveolar nasal	night
r	voiced alveolar trill	Spanish carro
ɾ	voiced alveolar flap	Spanish caro
s	voiceless alveolar fricative	silly
z	voiced alveolar fricative	zebra
ɬ	voiceless alveolar lateral fricative	Welsh ll
ɹ	voiced alveolar approximant	rib
l	voiced alveolar lateral approximant	lip
Palato-alveolar		
ʃ	voiceless palato-alveolar fricative	ship
ʒ	voiced palato-alveolar fricative	vision
tʃ	voiceless palato-alveolar affricate	church
dʒ	voiced palato-alveolar affricate	magic
Palatal		
ɲ	voiced palatal nasal	vigniette
ç	voiceless palatal fricative	German ich
j	voiced palatal approximant	yet
ʎ	voiced palatal lateral approximant	Italian figlio
Velar		
k	voiceless velar stop	kiss
g	voiced velar stop	good
ŋ	voiced velar nasal	sing
x	voiceless velar fricative	Scots loch
w	voiced labio-velar approximant	between
Uvular/Glottal		
ʀ	voiceless uvular continuant	French rouge
h	voiceless glottal fricative	hat

Vowels (arranged by where they happen in the mouth)



IPA symbol	Description	Example
i	close front unrounded	peat
y	close front rounded	French tu
ɪ	near-close front unrounded	pit
e	close-mid front unrounded	pate
ø	close-mid front unrounded	French peu
ɛ	open-mid front unrounded	pet
œ	open-mid front unrounded	French œuf
æ	near-open front unrounded	pat
a	open front unrounded	German Mann
ə	mid-central	putt
u	close back unrounded	Pooh
ʊ	near-close back rounded	put
o	close-mid back rounded	Poe
ɔ	open-mid back rounded	German Gott
ɑ	open back unrounded	pot

Common Diphthongs

IPA symbol	Example
ei	day
ai	ride
aʊ	house
ɔi	boy

Some Examples

De bone amour et de læaul amie
 Me vient sovant pities et remembrance,
 Si que jamais a nul jor de ma vie
 N'oblirai son vis ne sa semblance.

[də bɒn amuː e də leau amie
 mə vjɛnt suvɑn pitjɛts e ɹəmɑmbɹɑnsə
 si kə dʒɑ mɛs a nyl dʒuː də ma viə
 nublɪ.ɹɛ sɒn vis nə sɑ sɑmblɑnsə]

- “De bone amour,”
 Gace Brulé,
 Northern France, late 12thC

Von mayden pin ich dick werawbt.
 des mueß mein frewd engelliden.
 der mir zu sehen ist erlaubt.
 den sich ich laider sellden.

[fɒn meɪdən pɪn ɪx dɪx bæʊpt
 dɛs mʊs mɛɪn frɔɪd ɛngɛldɪdən
 dɜr mɪr tsuː seːɑn ɪst ɛrlaʊpt
 dɛ:n sɪx ɪx laɪdər sɛldən]

- “Von meiden pin ich dick berawbt,”
 Bavaria, middle 15thC

Edi beo þu, heuene queen,
 folkes froure and engles blis,
 moder unwemmed and maiden clene,
 switch in world non oþer nis.

[e:di be: ðu: heve:ne kwe:ne
 fɒlkɛs frʊ:(ɛ) ɑnd ɛŋglɛs blɪs
 mo:dɜr ʊnwɛmɛd ɑnd mæɪdɛn clɛ:nɛ
 swɪtʃ -ɪn wɔ:ld nɔ:n o:ðɛr nɪs]

- “Edi beo thu,”
 England, later 13thC

Pastime with good company
 I love and shall until I die.
 Gruch so will, but none deny,
 So God be pleas'd, so live will I.

[pæstəɪm wɪð gʊd kʊmpəni
 əɪ lʊv ænd ʃæl ʊntɪl əɪ dɪ
 grʊtʃ sɔ: wɪ bʊt nʊn dɪ:nəɪ
 sɔ: gɒd bi: plɪ:zd sɔ: lɪv wɪl əɪ]

- “Pastime with Good Company”,
 England, early 16thC

Further Resources

- <http://ipa.group.shef.ac.uk/symbols.php>

The University of Sheffield hosts a page that does exactly one thing: it provides a table of all of the IPA symbols. Clicking on each symbol pops up a window that will tell you the description of the sound and show you a video of someone pronouncing the sound, complete with an animated cutaway of what's happening inside the mouth. Great for pinning down exactly *what* sound is denoted by a symbol.

- <http://www.omniglot.com/writing/languages.htm>

A lovely Welshman named Simon Ager has created a site called Omniglot, which has an overview of an enormous number of languages. Most pertinently, each language page has a listing of all of the sounds of the language and how they are spelled and how they affect each other in various configurations—and those are all described using IPA symbols. Invaluable for puzzling out how exactly a particular spelling might be pronounced in a particular language.

- <http://www.langsci.ucl.ac.uk/ipa/>

This is the website of the International Phonetic Association, who are the folks who develop and maintain the symbol set. Learn as much as you might have ever wanted to know about IPA here!

- *Handbook of the International Phonetic Association: A Guide to the Use of the International Phonetic Alphabet*, International Phonetic Association, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Exactly what it says on the tin. A book put out by the International Phonetic Association as a comprehensive guide; it describes how to put the Alphabet to use, clearly and thoroughly.

- *Singing Early Music: The Pronunciation of European Languages in the Late Middle Ages and Renaissance*, edited by Timothy J. McGee with A.J. Rigg and David N. Klausner, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004.

Provides detailed pronunciation guidance and sample texts for speaking and singing English, 16th c. Scots, Anglo-Latin, Old French, French Latin, Occitan, Catalan, Castilian, Spanish Latin, Galician-Portuguese, Portuguese Latin, Italian, Italian Latin, Middle High German, Late Medieval and Early High New German, German Latin, Flemish/Dutch, and Netherlands Latin, using IPA symbols. An audio CD is included with demonstrations of all of these languages, and recordings of the sample texts so that you can read along. NB: the examples in this handout were all drawn from this book.

- <http://www.ceteros.org/classes/how-do-i-pronounce-these-squiggles/>
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There is a constantly updating webpage that is a reference companion to this class; among other things, it includes sound samples for all the phones listed in this handout. And please do email me if you have any more questions!