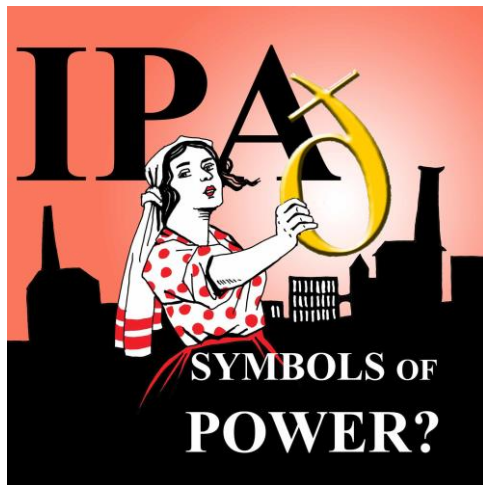


By Mark Hancock, first published in *Modern English Teacher* Vol, 29.3 (July 2020)



There seems to be a love-hate relationship between the English teaching community and phonemic symbols. Some teachers love them, others won't use them. A third category uses them under duress, but do not feel comfortable in doing so. This article is for anybody, but especially teachers in this third category.

A teacher's feelings about the material they're teaching with are often perceptible to the class. If a teacher uses phonemic symbols with confidence and pleasure, that will communicate itself to the class. If on the other hand a teacher uses them but dislikes doing so, it's likely that this dislike will

be part of what the learners take home from the lesson. I would like, if at all possible, to help teachers feel more at home with the symbols – to feel as if they 'own' them.

### What is the IPA?

To begin with, we need a little background on where the phonemic symbols come from – the IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet). This alphabet was constructed by the International Phonetic Association, which was founded in Paris in 1886. The full set of symbols was intended to be able to represent all meaningful sounds in all of the world's languages. The use of IPA symbols specifically in English language teaching only came later.

When symbols are repurposed to represent meaningful sounds in one specific language, they are known not as phonetic symbols but instead, phonemic. A phonetic symbol can be thought of as objectively representing a specific sound. A phonemic symbol, on the other hand, is more subjective - it represents what the speakers of a specific language *think* is a specific sound, even though it might in fact be a range of sounds. For example, speakers of English may think all instances of the phoneme /t/ are the same sound, whereas in fact the /t/ in *top* is slightly different from the /t/ in *stop*. A phoneme may vary across accents too - the /t/ in *city* will be different in the accents of London and Los Angeles. The same /t/ symbol can be used to represent all of these sounds.

### The IPA as symbols of power

When the symbols of the IPA were first repurposed to describe British English, the assumption was that the phonemes should represent the accent of power at that time -

namely RP (Received Pronunciation). It seemed obvious that anybody who was learning the language would want to aim for that specific accent, since it is the one which British listeners would find most acceptable. And it wasn't only language learners who might aim for RP - speakers of regional accents may also want to "improve" themselves by acquiring it. Hence the popularity of the kind of elocution lessons which were the subject of Shaw's play *Pygmalion*, written in 1913.

From the start, then, a strong bond was formed in people's minds between the IPA and prestige accents such as RP: the letters of the English phonemic alphabet became in effect symbols of power. We should avoid the temptation of thinking that such accents are somehow "better" though. As John Wells (1982) points out, 'A standard accent is regarded as a standard not because of any intrinsic qualities it may possess, but because of an arbitrary attitude adopted towards it by society'.

### **Updating the symbols?**

Over time, accents have evolved, as have social attitudes. RP has acquired a dated and elitist flavour, and linguists have sought to update it. For example, Geoff Lindsay in his book *English After RP* (2019) describes how the standard Southern British English has changed in recent decades, and he proposes some important modifications to the phonemic alphabet we use in teaching it, to bring it more in line with phonetic reality.

Lindsay is persuasive in his argument for moving beyond RP and updating our description of the accent which may be considered as 'standard'. However, there remains the assumption that pronunciation teaching is about getting learners to conform to a specific standard native accent - in other words, that it is accent training. Do learners really need the degree of phonetic detail that he is suggesting?

### **Nativeness versus intelligibility**

According to John Levis (2019), pronunciation teaching can be based on one of two contrasting positions which he calls the *Nativeness Principle* and the *Intelligibility Principle*. The kind of accent training envisaged by Lindsay seems to be based on the Nativeness Principle, the assumption being that learners should try to sound like native speakers. Teachers who follow the Intelligibility Principle, on the other hand, take the view that the accent doesn't matter as long as it is intelligible. Improving pronunciation is not about sounding "better", whatever that might mean, but about being better understood.

As Jennifer Jenkins (2000) has pointed out, English today is different from most other languages in that it is a global *Lingua Franca*, and pronunciation teaching needs to take this into account. We need to break the link with prestige native accents such as RP and instead focus on intelligibility. If we are to use IPA symbols in our teaching, then the perceived link between these symbols and RP needs to be broken too.

I wonder if the perceived IPA connection to RP is actually a confusion of phonemic and phonetic. As I have said, unlike phonetic symbols, *phonemic* symbols do not represent specific sounds but a range of sounds. In that case, they can be flexible enough to accommodate a fair amount of accent variation. Let me illustrate that point with a specific example.

### **A case study: the *duck* vowel.**

As a trainee teacher, I had trouble with the phonemic symbol for the vowel in *duck*. The symbol is an upside-down V, known as the *turned V*. I was told that the vowel sound in my Manchester accent did not match this symbol. I think that was wrong, at least if we are following the intelligibility principle. The turned V is both a phonetic symbol and a phonemic symbol, and that may be the source of the confusion. As a phonetic symbol, it represents a specific sound which is not present in my accent (and nor is it present in RP, in fact - which may come as a surprise to some teachers). As a *phonemic* symbol however, the turned V can represent the *duck* vowel in both RP and my Manchester accent. It is not specific to either. The idea that it only represented the RP version was merely an arbitrary convention.

### **A phonemic chart as a set of oppositions**

If we are following the Intelligibility Principle, I think the best way to view the phonemic chart is not as a set of sounds, but as a set of oppositions. The turned V represents the vowel in *duck* as opposed to the one in *dog* or the one in *cat*, for example. The actual quality of the vowel sound in *duck* doesn't matter much, as long as those oppositions are maintained.

Some teachers worry that a sound in one accent may overlap with a different sound in another. For example, the vowel in New Zealand *pat* sounds like the one in UK *pet*. Does that mean that a New Zealander can never distinguish *pat* from *pet*? No it doesn't, because the vowel in New Zealand *pet* in turn sounds different (like the one in UK *pit*, in fact). This means that the distinctions are maintained, and speakers with these accents are mutually intelligible once the ear has adjusted. The same phonemic symbols can be used for the equivalent vowels in both varieties of English, even though they sound different.

### **Where problems may arise**

IPA symbols can not easily accommodate all accent variations however. There is a problem when two phonemes are conflated in a given accent. For example, for many Northern English speakers, there is no difference between the vowel sounds in *putt* and *put*, so for this accent, we have a redundant symbol in our set. Fortunately for the purposes of intelligibility, few words are distinguished by this vowel opposition anyway, so it is not a big issue. However, when using the chart, a Northern English teacher would have to explain that in their accent, those two symbols represent the same sound.

This raises the question of phoneme confluations in our learners' accents. If, for example, our learners pronounce the same vowel sound in both *ship* and *sheep*, is that a problem? We can't know for sure. It may be the case that our learners can make themselves pretty well understood without making that particular opposition. The problem is that with every opposition lost, the space for misunderstanding grows. It's like pixels in a digital photo - every pixel lost makes the image a little less clear. So, as a rule of thumb, I would suggest that we aim to help our learners produce and distinguish all of the

oppositions in the IPA phonemic chart, unless we have evidence to suggest that a given opposition doesn't matter.

### **The exceptional case of schwa**

There is one important phoneme conflation which I think requires a special mention and that is the overlap between the schwa and the *duck* vowel. I mentioned above that the turned V symbol represents a wide range of possible sounds, depending on the speaker's accent. Among these is one which is identical to the schwa. The presence of both the upturned V and the schwa symbol on phonemic charts can raise awkward questions in the classroom, and teachers can waste a lot of time trying to demonstrate a difference that doesn't exist.

My pragmatic solution to this problem is to treat the schwa as a special case – as a vowel sound which is not of the same kind as all the others. I would present it as a potential variant of any vowel when it is reduced, in an unstressed syllable. Take the name *London*, for example. The first vowel sound is the *duck* vowel and the second is the schwa, and the difference is not in the sound quality, but rather in stress – the first is stressed and the second is unstressed. In other words, I suggest that being unstressed is the *defining feature* of the sound represented by the schwa symbol.

### **The IPA as symbols of empowerment**

By way of summing up, I would like now to return to the big picture. When the IPA symbols are attached to a specific prestige accent such as RP, they are symbols of power. Learners and teachers whose accent does not match will feel that they are deficient even when they are perfectly intelligible. If we can break the assumed link with RP (or indeed any specific native variety), then the symbols can be used more flexibly. They can match up to the phonemes of any intelligible speaker of English no matter what their accent. A non-standard or non-native speaker can make the symbols their own and teach pronunciation with no sense of inferiority. The IPA letters can become symbols of empowerment.

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