



Banha University
Faculty of Arts- English Department
Open Education
Second Level/Fourth Semester 2013/2014
Phonetics (223)

Respond to the following questions:

1. What is meant by “Phonetic Transcription”?

(Provide your answer with examples as possible).

Phonetic transcription

The practice of using written letters to represent the sounds of speech is called phonetic transcription. Transcriptions represent an analysis of the sounds we can hear, so transcriptions often have a linguistic status. It is useful for phoneticians to write down what we can hear, and we need to do this in a way that is systematic, easy to use, easily understood by others. However, how



we transcribe is not a simple matter. Using just the letters of the Roman alphabet is problematic for a number of reasons.

First, the phonetic values of letters are variable. For instance, the letter <g> is regularly used in most European languages with the value of a voiced velar plosive, [g]. In Dutch <g> is pronounced like the <ch> in Scottish ‘loch’; in French and Portuguese before an <e> or <i> it has the same value as <si> in ‘invasion’, [ʒ]; in Swedish in the same context <g> is pronounced like English <y> in ‘yes’; in English (sporadically) and Italian (regularly) [dʒ], as in ‘gem’. Within English, letters can have very different values, as in <g> in ‘get’ and ‘gem’, or <a> in ‘sofa’, ‘hat’ and ‘hate’.

These differences are due to different spelling conventions being used at different times in the history of the language, or spelling conventions reflecting the etymology of words, and through the conservative approach to spelling reform adopted in the English-speaking world. Secondly, the Roman alphabet has no symbol for some sounds of English, so that we use digraphs (combinations of two letters) like <th> for the different sounds of ‘thick’ ([θ]) and ‘this’ ([ð]) or <sh> for the [ʃ] sound in ‘ship’; but ‘facial’, ‘admission’, ‘station’ and ‘louche’ also contain this sound, where it is



represented differently. So the alphabetic principle in English writing is weak. A number of writing systems built on phonetic principles have been invented over the centuries, but the one that is most widely used is the alphabet of the International Phonetic Association (IPA).

2. Show the difference between:

- **Oral and nasal airflows**

Oral and nasal airflow

Air can exit the vocal tract through the nose or the mouth. This is controlled by the position of the velum. The velum is a sort of valve that controls airflow through the nose. If the velum is raised, then the nasal cavities are blocked off. Consequently, air cannot pass through them, and it must exit the vocal tract through the mouth. Sounds with airflow exiting through the mouth only are said to have oral airflow. If the velum is lowered, air flows through the nasal cavities, and out through the nostrils. If the air flows through the nose, the airflow is nasal. If you say a [s] sound and pinch your nose, you will notice that you can easily continue the [s] sound. This is because [s] is oral: the velum is raised and makes a tight seal, preventing escape of air through the nose. On the other hand, if you say a [m] sound and pinch your nose, you will notice that



you can only continue the [m] sound for a very short time. This is because the lips are closed, making oral escape impossible, but the velum is lowered, so that the airflow is nasal. By pinching your nose, you effectively seal off the only remaining means of escape for the air. A third possibility exists, where air escapes through the nose and the mouth. For these sounds, the velum is lowered, but there is no complete closure in the oral tract, as we had for [m] (where the complete closure is at the lips). A good example would be a nasalized vowel, as in the French word ‘pain’, [p.], ‘bread’. You might try making a nasalized [s] sound, [s.], but you will notice that it is much quieter and less hissy than it should be, with as much noise caused by air coming through the nostrils as through the mouth.

- **Consonants and vowels.**

Consonants are those sounds which are produced with some kind of constriction in the vocal tract. We can feel, see and hear where these constrictions are made, and what kind of constriction they are.

Vowels, by contrast, are produced without a constriction in the vocal tract, and it is harder to sense how they are articulated.