

introduction

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1.01 What is Phonetics?

Languages can basically be thought of as systems — highly complicated ones — which enable us to express our thoughts by means of “vocal noises”, and to extract meaning from the “noises” (*speech sounds* from now on) that are made by other people. Linguistics is the study of the nature and properties of these systems, and its various branches focus on different aspects of the communication process.

Phonetics is the branch concerned with human speech sounds, and itself has three different aspects:

- **Articulatory Phonetics** (the most anatomical and physiological division) describes how vowels and consonants are produced or “articulated” in various parts of the mouth and throat.
- **Acoustic Phonetics** (the branch that has the closest affinities with physics) studies the sound waves that transmit the vowels and consonants through the air from the speaker to the hearer.
- **Auditory Phonetics** (the branch of most interest to psychologists) looks at the way in which the hearer’s brain decodes the sound waves back into the vowels and consonants originally intended by the speaker.

Closely associated with Phonetics is another branch of linguistics known as *Phonology*. This focuses on the way languages use differences between sounds in order to convey differences of meaning between words, each language having its own unique sound pattern. Phonology is really the link between Phonetics and the rest of Linguistics.

This course focuses on the first of these aspects: Articulatory Phonetics.

Warning. The word *phonetics* is often incorrectly used to refer to the symbols of the International Phonetic Alphabet (the IPA). So people say: “How is this written in phonetics?”, “It was all in phonetics, so I couldn’t understand it”, or “Dictionaries use phonetics to show pronunciation”.

This isn’t how the term should be used. As has just been explained, Phonetics is a branch of Linguistics, not an alphabet. So it would be more appropriate to say: “How is this written in phonetic script?”, “It was all in phonetic transcription...”, or “Dictionaries show pronunciation by using the phonetic alphabet”.

You will be introduced to the IPA as you work through this course. Its symbols are identified by square brackets: [p], [u], [ð], etc. Ordinary letters and spellings, on the other hand, will always be given in italics. As you can see, some of the phonetic symbols are the same as ordinary letters, but others will be new to you.

1.02 Why Study Phonetics?

Obviously it's a fundamental part of Linguistics, so no-one studying this subject can ignore it. But for students of languages, there are also practical advantages to be gained from knowing some basic Phonetics.

Firstly, you should be able to improve your pronunciation of foreign languages if you have a clearer idea of how the sounds are actually produced. Troublesome sounds like French *r*, German *ii* or Spanish *j* lose their mystery and become less daunting once you know how they relate to other more familiar sounds. And there are various general features of the "British accent" which can be characterized by phonetic analysis: when you know what it is that makes British accents so British, you'll be well on the way to getting rid of yours (if you have one: most people do to some extent at least). What's more, you'll be able to look up the pronunciation of words in the dictionary once you're familiar with the phonetic alphabet.

Secondly, many of you will at some stage or other find yourselves teaching a language to other people: either French, German, Spanish, etc. if you make a career of teaching, or English if you are involved in ESOL (English as a Second Language, also known as EFL: English as a Foreign Language). ESOL is not just a useful source of vac jobs: it is a serious career in itself. And many Modern Languages students spend a year of their degree course working abroad as English language teachers. In all such cases, you are likely to have to help learners to improve their accents. If someone is having difficulty with English *th*, it's not much help just to tell them "don't say it like that, say it like I do". (Unless they're natural mimics, in which case they won't need instruction from you anyway.) Much better if you can guide them to make the appropriate tongue movements, on a basis of your knowledge of phonetics.

In short, Phonetics always looks good on a language teacher's cv.

1.03 Working Through This Course

It contains a section describing the organs of speech, a section on vowels, a section on consonants, and a concluding section on phonetic transcription, together with a few suggestions for optional further reading.

There are also a large number of exercises, answers to all of which can be accessed. Some of the exercises are to enable you to check that you've absorbed

and understood the material covered, others encourage you to think more about the languages you are studying and more particularly to draw on your experience and knowledge of English.