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The Revised International Phonetic Alphabet

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DISCUSSION NOTE

The Revised International Phonetic Alphabet

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In August 1989 the International Phonetic Association held a convention in Kiel, Germany, in order to revise the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). The principal product of the meeting was the chart accompanying this note, together with the report published in the Association's *Journal* (International Phonetic Association 1989). The purpose of this note is not to argue for or against different aspects of the new chart. It was quite clear to everybody at the Kiel convention that this is not the best possible chart; but it was also clear that we could not agree on how it should be improved. My own opinions on its current failings and possible future revisions are appearing elsewhere (Ladefoged 1990). Here I simply wish to urge linguists to abandon idiosyncratic systems of phonetic representation, and to adopt the new international standard.

There are three points concerning the IPA that should encourage linguists to regard it as suitable for their needs. The first is that the Association has made it evident that the chart has a linguistic basis, rather than being a general phonetic notation scheme. As the report notes: 'The IPA is intended to be a set of symbols for representing all the possible sounds of the world's languages.' It goes on to make it clear that by 'possible sounds' it means phonologically contrastive elements within a language, stating that 'the sounds that are represented are primarily those that distinguish one word from another.'

The second point that is of interest to linguists is that the Association recognizes that the symbols can be taken to represent what linguists would call distinctive feature combinations. The new IPA chart does not actually use the term 'features'; it retains the names of the traditional phonetic categories for the row and column headings. But the linguistic basis for these phonetic categories is made evident by statements in the report (which will eventually become part of an official *Handbook of the IPA*) such as: 'The categories define a number of natural classes of sounds that operate in phonological rules and historical sound changes. The symbols of the IPA are shorthand ways of indicating certain intersections of these categories. Thus [p] is a shorthand way of designating the intersection of the categories voiceless, bilabial, and plosive; [m] is the intersection of the categories voiced, bilabial, and nasal; and so on.' Most linguists should find little difficulty in regarding what are here called categories as equivalent to what are elsewhere called features. Of course the Association nowhere suggests that these categories are either the sole or the best set of features for linguistic purposes. They simply make evident the linguistic underpinnings of the IPA chart.

The final point to be noted here is that the chart is an attempt to provide a summary of agreed phonetic knowledge on a single page. Of course, the pho-

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neticians who were at the Kiel convention, and the Council of the International Phonetic Association who subsequently approved the report, are not in agreement on every aspect of the chart. In fact it is probably the case that all of them think that they could devise a better chart. (I am sure I could.) But the great majority considered that it was more important to publish an agreed standard than to maintain personal biases, however deeply held.

There is no doubt that the new chart has some serious inadequacies, and it may be necessary on some occasions to use a non-IPA representation. But members of the Association hope that linguists who feel compelled to use other symbols will feel equally compelled to explain why they are departing from standard international usage, and to provide a way of mapping their system of representation onto that of the IPA as far as possible. The use of locally approved symbols should become as rare as the reporting of scientific results in other fields in local units. We would be very surprised if English-speaking chemists called common salt *SaCl* because their students found *Sa* an easier abbreviation to remember than *Na* for sodium. Few of us expect American physics journals to discuss the speed of sound using measurements given in inches per second. Nowadays even the British use calories for measuring heat rather than old-fashioned BTUs (British Thermal Units). Let us hope that similar outdated local usages will soon disappear from the linguistic world.

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