International Phonetic Alphabet School

DAY 1: SCHWA
WEDNESDAY 9TH OF JANUARY
with Paula Juan Lima

Pronunciation is crucial to intelligibility in interlingual communication. When people use English as a vehicular language, it may become a proficiency or a status marker.
To understand what you hear in others, to converge or diverge with others in conversation, you need to be very precise and analyse what you hear.

Phonetics can help you do this. It deals with production of speech: how you actually make sounds in your mouth. And also with the perception of speech: how you hear what other people say. Phonetics makes use of the international phonetic alphabet, of IPA. Every sound that you can make with your human breath, translates into a unique symbol.

IPA is built around two concepts: consonants or vowels. To understand the difference between them, I want you to consider the unique Schwa. **Schwa is the sound that you make when you do nothing with your mouth. You just let air pass: /ə/.** Everybody has their own non-sound, their own middle sound schwa /ə/.

When your Schwa leaves your body, and it is obstructed by your lips /p/, by your tongue /t/, or by your throat /g/, you make a consonant.

You can change the tone of your Schwa by changing the inside shape of your mouth: /i/ /u/ /ɒ/ /a/ /e/ /o/. When nothing obstructs the air and you use your mouth as a kind of musical instrument, you make a vowel.

In 'native' varieties of English, the majority of vowels is replaced by a schwa. In most other varieties of English, vowels are pronounced in their stronger form.

Today, listen out for the schwa in other people's speech and in your own.

Here are two experiments you can do:

- In conversation with somebody, listen to the pitch of their schwa. Then try to adapt your own schwa to that pitch. What happens to your interaction when you converge to your conversation partner in that way?

- Again in conversation, try to replace as many of your vowels with a schwa, without becoming unintelligible. Again, what happens to the interaction?