WHAT IS PHONEMIC TRANSCRIPTION?
fəʊˈniːmɪk trænsˈkrɪpʃən/

1. What is phonemic transcription?

The **phonemic transcription** of a word shows how that word is pronounced. It is composed of **phonemic symbols** and **diacritics**. Each phonemic symbol represents one sound, or phoneme.

Diacritics are symbols which give you more information about the way in which a word is pronounced. The stress mark is one example. This is a small symbol which appears in front of the stressed syllable. Example: / əˈhed/ . This diacritic shows that there are two syllables and the stress is on the second. Such information is important, when learning how to pronounce a word correctly, as Czech words have the stress on the first syllable.

The English spelling systém, its **orthography,** does not always give you a clear idea of its sound system, its **phonology**. Therefore, when learning a new word, it is important not only to know how to spell a word, but also how to pronounce it. It might even be argued that pronunciation is more important than spelling, since English is spoken much more than it is written. You are far more likely to be speaking English as a foreign language than writing it.

If you come across a new word in writing, it is essential that you learn its pronunciation and that you make a note of that pronunciation . For this you will need to consult a dictionary which will give you the phonemic transcription of the word.
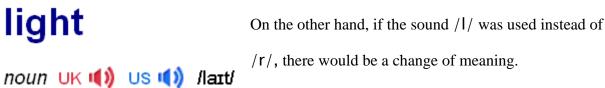
2. How does it work?

Each sound of the language is given a different symbol. There are 44 phonemic symbols to represent the sounds of English. This course and dictionaries have a broad transcription of each word. Take the word *right.* Look at its transcription in the Cambridge Online dictionary.

right

adjective UK 🔊 US 🔊 /raɪt/

Source: http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/right

If you click the link above and then click the sound icons for the UK and US pronunciation, you will notice that the first letter sounds different under UK and US. However, the first phoneme is still broadly speaking, the phoneme /r/. It is not a different phoneme.

light

noun UK 🔊 US 🔊 /laɪt/

On the other hand, if the sound /l/ was used instead of /r/, there would be a change of meaning.

Source: http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/light

If the meaning of a word changes with the different sound, then this indicates that the sound itself is a different phoneme of a particular language.

In English several consonants can replace /r/ and change the meaning of the word.

phoneme	/r/	/l/	/m/	/s/	/t/	/w/	/n/	/h/
transcription	/raɪt/	/laɪt/	/maɪt/	/saɪt/	/taɪt/	/waɪt/	/naɪt/	/haɪt/
word	*right*	*light*	*might*	*sight*	*tight*	*white*	*(k)night*	*height*

In each of these words there is a (different) consonant followed by the same diphthong and the consonant /t/. Since the eight sounds change the meaning of the word, these are all eight separate phonemes.

3. Minimal Pairs

Two words where only one phoneme is changed to alter the meaning are called **minimal pairs**.

Examples of minimal pairs are:

pet-**b**et, b**e**t-b**a**t, ba**t**-ba**d, b**ad-**h**ad, h**a**d-h**ar**d, **h**ard-**c**ard c**a**rd-c**o**rd, **c**ord-**s**word, **s**word-**b**ored, b**o**red-b**i**rd, bir**d**-b**ear**d, **b**eard-**f**eared, feared-**ch**eered **ch**eered-**w**eird.

If you experiment with any combination of minimal pairs, (that is, changing one sound for another and thereby changing the meaning), you will discover that there are 44 phonemes in English.

On the other hand, if you say <t> by touching the back of your top teeth with your tongue, instead of touching the alveolar ridge, it will sound a bit strange but it will not affect the **meaning of a word**. Say *table* using an initial voiceless alveolar plosive (the usual way of pronouncing /t/ in English). Now try to produce a voiceless *dental* plosive, by touching the back of the top teeth with your tongue. There is no actual change in meaning; the word is still recognisable as *table*. Therefore these two sounds fall within the category of **one phoneme**. Only if meaning is changed, are we are talking about a different phoneme of English.

Some dictionaries, including those produced by Czech publishers, use square brackets for their transcription. The usual convention among in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) dictionaries and teaching materials is to use slashes // for a broad transcription. Here we will be using / /.

For more information on transcription see the Antimoon website
http://www.antimoon.com/how/pronunc-trans.htm