Pronunciation in the 10th edition of the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*

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The 10th edition of the *Oxford Advanced Leaner's Dictionary*, in keeping with previous editions, uses an IPA-based phonemic system to indicate pronunciation. The system makes use of symbols familiar to users of other ELT resources. The system is used to suggest British (Received Pronunciation) and American (General American) pronunciations, and the intention is to provide learners with—where possible—a single pronunciation for each word.

Each part of this statement is worth attention.

in keeping with previous editions

The OALD has used IPA-based phonemic transcription to indicate pronunciation since its first edition (1948). Early editions used transcriptions similar to those found in contemporary editions of Daniel Jones's *English Pronouncing Dictionary* (1917), while the 3rd edition (1974) introduced a new phonemic system, designed by Jack Windsor Lewis to meet the needs of English language learners. During OALD3's time in print the transcriptions were revised using a new system introduced by A C Gimson and Susan Ramsaran, and the symbols used by this system are those that have become familiar in ELT. The system was revised for OALD5 (1995) by Michael Ashby, who also did much to shape and define the OALD's approach to pronunciation in general. With a few modifications his system and (as far is as possible given the influence of other editors, not least myself) his approach has been followed to OALD10 (2020).

an IPA-based phonemic system

It's not unusual for the transcriptions in the OALD and other dictionaries to be referred to as 'the IPA', 'the phonetics' or 'phonetic transcriptions'. This is not strictly correct. A phonetic transcription of a native speaker of RP saying <document> might look like this:

[ˈd̥ʷɒk̟jũmə̃nˀt]

This narrow phonetic transcription uses a range of IPA symbols to note in detail how one native speaker of RP, at a particular moment in time, pronounced this word. Phonetic transcription is ideal for transcribing an occurrence of speech without reference to any assumptions or rules for any particular variety of speech. As a model for how another speaker should approach producing this word it's not ideal—the transcription is complicated and, considering the

complex detail noted, the same English speaker may not produce this word in exactly the same way a second time.

As a model for pronunciation, a phonemic transcription is more appropriate. Symbols from the IPA are used in a more general, abstract way.

/ˈdɒkjumənt/

Used in this way each symbol is a phoneme, not representing a specific sound but a family of related sounds. The grouping of sounds into phonemes depends on the variety of speech being described. In the example above, for a native speaker of English the /d/ will usually be devoiced [d̥] in this initial position and labialized [dʷ] under the influence of the rounded vowel that follows, but related sounds such as the dental [d̪] in <width> /wɪdθ/ or inaudibly released [d̚] in bedtime <bedtime> /ˈbedtaɪm/ are also grouped into the same phoneme, as these features are variations determined by context or speaker choice. The use of the 'wrong' member of a phoneme may sound unusual but will not usually confuse one word for another in this variety of speech. This makes a phonemic system efficient—it can use a relatively small number of symbols—and the transcriptions made using it are uncomplicated and accessible.

The system makes use of symbols familiar to users of other ELT resources

Familiar, but not necessarily identical. Between publishers (and even different titles from the same publisher) the systems used to describe varieties of English can differ, particularly in which symbols from the IPA are used phonemically. Where a phonemic system is in use it is important that the symbols and variety of speech being described are clearly defined—for OALD10 you can find this description on pages R30/R31 in the print edition, and at https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/about/english/pronunciation_english online.

The words "familiar to users of other ELT resources" are important here—the symbols associated with Gimson have become so accepted in ELT that to vary them risks confusing learners or seeming 'incompatible' with other ELT products. Yet there are reasons to vary the phonemic symbolization of RP. Many of the commonly used vowel symbols are frustratingly far from their IPA values—the /e/ of <bed> being a good example. Given its close relationship with the spelling letter <e> the choice of symbol—especially for ELT—makes sense, but the actual IPA value of [e] is quite different. The system used by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2000) to describe RP chooses ɛ instead, but there is no disagreement over what the vowel sound in <bed> is—the OED is not an ELT text and is free to employ a symbol closer to the phonetic reality.

Even among titles intended for ELT, and even where the choice of symbols does not differ greatly, there may still be differences between systems. Phonemic /fəˈniːmɪk/ to phonetic

[fəˈnɛtɪk] transcription ranges along a continuum. Where pronunciations cannot be meaningfully described by the OALD RP/GA phonemic system—for example, World English pronunciations such as the one at <boma>—OALD10 uses square bracketed phonetic transcriptions, but these are deliberately broad and low in detail in order to be accessible to learners. A phonemic system might also add details that are not strictly phonemic, perhaps to draw attention to particular features of a variety of speech—the use of a diacritic to indicate /t/ tapping in GA transcriptions, for example.

Systems can differ for practical rather than phonetic reasons—difficulty in rendering IPA symbols in print has influenced the choice of symbols in some now well-established systems. The OALD does not use a diacritic to indicate the syllabic consonants [n̩] and [l̩] in words like <station> and <little>, in part because they are implied by their position, but also because the syllabic consonant marker is easily confused with a smudge or mark on the page in printed form, and in online or other digital forms can drift to the left or right, where it might be confused with a secondary stress marker or appear beneath another symbol.

The system is used to suggest British (Received Pronunciation) and American (General American) pronunciations

If a separate system is used for GA, taken alongside the RP transcriptions, this can communicate more about how GA pronunciation differs in detail. Most GA-specific phonemic systems acknowledge some of these differences by not using length marks on vowels, representing the vowel in <bird> differently, transcribing a schwa in weak syllables where an RP transcription might use /ɪ/ or /ʊ/, indicating intervocalic /t/ tapping, and through wider use of secondary stresses. This was the approach taken for the GA-specific system used by the *Oxford Advanced American Dictionary* (2011). In such a system it might also be useful to symbolize rhotic vowels by the use of a diacritic—e.g. [ɚ]—rather than a sequence of vowel followed by /r/. The OED indicates differences in detail for some RP and GA diphthongs by symbolizing them with different starting positions, and represents the vowel in <strut> with a schwa rather than /ʌ/.

OALD6 (2000) made explicit some previously implied GA detail by transcribing the RP diphthongs /ɪə eə ʊə/ as monophthongs /ɪr er ʊr/, explicitly noting rhoticity in GA transcriptions, and introducing the GA <goat> diphthong **oʊ**, distinguishing it from RP /əʊ/. This last change—requiring the introduction of a new symbol **o** to the phonemic system—is consistent with how the <goat> vowel is represented in many GA-specific systems, but perhaps suggested a more significant difference between the RP and GA pronunciation of this vowel than necessary, especially given the lack of other GA features that might have been added. OALD10 has rolled back this change, allowing /əʊ/ to describe the <goat> vowel in both RP and GA. That this vowel is typically pronounced differently in RP and GA is not in question—only whether representing that difference is in balance with the system as a whole.

the intention is to provide learners with—where possible—a single pronunciation for each word.

This approach is enabled by the way the OALD handles RP and GA together. Representing GA in more detail, as suggested above, would mean that even a simple word like <feet> would require two transcriptions—RP **fiːt** GA **fit**. In print, representing the <goat> diphthong differently for GA would entail 4500 extra transcriptions. Leaving aside whether the degree of detail is appropriate for the OALD, an increased number of GA-specific transcriptions would cause the pronunciation information to take up more room on each printed page. The space available is finite, the OALD is not a dedicated pronunciation dictionary, and the pronunciation information has to be balanced with other information a learner requires.

Where further transcriptions are given, to save space these transcriptions are presented as partials (denoted by a hyphen at the start, end or either side of a transcription), requiring learners to reconstruct the full form. Ideally transcriptions would always be given in full. At best it could be argued a partial transcription draws some attention to the part that differs, although sometimes even this is obscured, as to avoid ambiguity these partial transcriptions often contain more than just the part that has changed. Partial transcriptions present an obstacle to quick, clear understanding.

A single pronunciation where possible suits the OALD not only for reasons of space and clarity, but also because the OALD aims to equip learners with a pronunciation for use. The OALD does not aim to exhaustively document pronunciations that a learner may hear used by native speakers. Where variant pronunciations are given it is because to represent one pronunciation over another would suggest a dominant pronunciation where this isn't the case—for example <garage>. While the OALD system may not represent the fine detail of GA pronunciation, where the common GA pronunciation differs from RP in a way that the system can represent these variants are always given.

Phonemic transcription encompasses some variation—for example, it's quite common for some RP speakers to consistently pronounce [t͡ʃ] where the OALD transcribes /tj/ (e.g. <tune> /tjuːn/) or [d͡ʒ] where the transcription is /dj/, for example in <due> /djuː/. Many will pronounce a schwa where /ɪ/ or /ʊ/ is transcribed in an unstressed syllable, and this should be assumed especially when reading OALD transcriptions as GA. These are common speech processes for the type of speech the OALD describes, but are by no means obvious to all learners of English. Making the effect of these processes explicit is desirable, but space (and clarity, once presented in partial form) argue against doing so.

Away from the printed page, in the OALD's digital forms, transcriptions can always be given in full and space is not a concern. It would make sense to utilize this freedom to make more pronunciation detail available—to demonstrate pronunciations that arise as a result of common

speech processes, note a larger number of variant pronunciations, and perhaps introduce a more detailed GA transcription system. However, on this last point there is concern that a difference in transcription systems between print and digital might cause confusion—it is clear that some learners are discouraged by differences between titles, so the use of different systems within a single title might not be helpful for all.

A way to make this accessible to learners would be to reveal the extra detail in the way an online map can be 'zoomed in'. The map analogy is useful. IPA-based transcription can be thought of as a mapping system, where a complex territory—a real occurrence of speech—is symbolized abstractly. Some maps are 'zoomed out' and represent only key information, while some represent much more detail. Some maps may have a particular emphasis, treating some areas generally and others in more detail. Enabling a user to reveal or focus on more detail as required would be a way to meet the needs of both learners with only limited phonetic experience and those with a developing or advanced interest.

This discussion of pronunciation in the 10th edition of the OALD has been structured similarly—presenting a number of key statements and then 'zooming in' has hopefully revealed more about the purpose of and approach to pronunciation in the OALD, about what phonemic transcription is, and why the approaches of different titles may differ. There are of course more examples and more detail that could have been explored, but this overview is not intended as a lesson on phonetics. Similarly it may be helpful to remember that the OALD does not aim to teach a learner phonetics. It only aims to use an IPA-based system to provide pronunciations for words, and some deeper understanding will only come through further reading. The *Handbook of the IPA* (1999) is a great and perhaps obvious starting point, containing many examples of the transcription of various varieties of speech, including Peter Roach's article on the Gimson-style transcription of RP. This article, also available freely online[1], reveals more about RP pronunciation and touches on many of the same points explored here. Michael Ashby's paper (2003)[2] on revising the phonetics of OALD5 and OALD6 explains how these editions differed from what went before, but also much about the OALD's current approach. Geoff Lindsey's recent book *English After RP* (2019) is an exploration of how the approach to transcription so familiar in ELT might change in the future, and his choice of symbols is challenging and thought-provoking. Also utilizing unfamiliar symbols but at the other end of IPA history, Daniel Jones's *An Outline of English Phonetics* (1956) still usefully describes the representation and reality of English pronunciation, and his *The Phoneme: Its Nature and Use* (1962) is a quite stunning theoretical work on phonemic transcription, taking many varieties of speech in its stride. The well-known English pronunciation dictionaries published by Routledge (2017), Cambridge (2011) and Longman (2008) provide more comprehensive pronunciation information than the OALD, as is to be expected. We are all describing more or less the same territory,

sometimes for different purposes, sometimes at differing levels of detail, and I would encourage learners not to be discouraged on encountering unexpected differences but to consider why they occur and what they might be attempting to communicate.

A note on transcription

Where symbols appear within slashes /ˌlaɪk ˈðɪs/ the transcriptions use the OALD10's phonemic system. Symbols in square brackets [ˈlaɪk ˈðɪs] refer more specifically to sounds on the IPA chart[3], while symbols or transcriptions that appear in bold ˌlʌɪk ˈðɪs are borrowings from other phonemic systems. Orthographic forms are given between angle brackets, <like this>.

Endnotes

[1] https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-the-international-phonetic-association/article/british-english-received-pronunciation/D4AFF0A7118E7081ACF7C7586FF87590

[2] https://internationalphoneticassociation.org/icphs-proceedings/ICPhS2003/p15_2853.html

[3] https://www.internationalphoneticassociation.org/content/full-ipa-chart

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Biography

Gary Leicester is a Pronunciation Data Architect at Oxford University Press. He is the Phonetics Editor for the 10th edition of the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* and works on pronunciation across a range of other titles, including the *Oxford English Dictionary*. He created the Oxford Soundbank, a resource of 900,000 audio files demonstrating English pronunciation, which are used by OUP's digital dictionaries, in licensed pronunciation products and dictionary results in search engines.