

## STANDARD TRANSCRIPTIONS AND THE IPA: A REPLY TO SHIBLES

by  
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In an article published in RASK, Shibles (1995) purports to provide an extended version of the IPA chart aimed at improving the descriptions of pronunciations of varieties of English given in reference books. His purpose appears to be didactic ('to aid the language teacher or learner' (p. 37)), although he claims also to have phonological aims. It seems to me that this article shows evidence of so much confusion, contradiction and downright error that it calls into question the editorial standards of RASK. While a detailed analysis of the paper pointing out all its peculiarities would be a case of overkill, it does seem to me that some of the things said in the paper really need to be challenged in print, if only as a warning to naive readers of the journal, possibly including Shibles himself.

### *The relationship between the IPA and IPA-S*

In his Chart 2 (p. 44), Shibles presents a vowel chart which is claimed to be an extended version of the IPA's vowel chart, attempting 'to retain the symbols and basic descriptive and relational import of the IPA chart' (p. 45). It is thus surprising to find that not only is the chart rather strangely labelled (which might be partly a printing error), but that it distorts the IPA's own chart unnecessarily. On the IPA's own chart, [ə] is a close-mid rounded central vowel, not a mid vowel like [ɚ], and has an unrounded congener (which Shibles omits). On the IPA's chart [ɜ] is an open-mid vowel (the IPA definition of [ɜ] as 'any additional mid-central vowel' about which Shibles complains (p. 46) is out-dated and no longer applies to the 1993 chart) and has a rounded congener, which Shibles omits. Although Shibles includes the 1993 version of the IPA chart in his article, it appears that in some ways he is still using an older version as his standard.

I must also confess that I find the matrix presented in Chart 2 incomprehensible. By the arrangement of symbols for the central vowels, Shibles manages to imply that column IV is for spread vowels and column V for rounded vowels. If that is the case, I cannot find it stated anywhere, and indeed the implication is that the difference between columns IV and V should be entirely a difference of backness.

If the implication is meant to be that rounded vowels are necessarily pronounced with a more retracted articulation than their unrounded congeners, I should like to know what the evidence for this position is. While rounded front vowels SOUND backer than their unrounded counterparts, this is not the same thing. Moreover, given that the central vowels are placed in the matrix, I fail to understand whether there is any theoretical implication to the fact that the front and back vowels are not placed in the same matrix, but out to the sides of the matrix. Given that we have two columns for back vowels, it might be expected that they would be filled with the appropriate unrounded and rounded symbols. But this raises a further question: we are given three columns for the front vowels, and it is not clear whether this is intended to mean that front vowels have more variability in front-back articulation than back vowels, and if so what evidence there is for such a position. It is, I think, fairly standardly accepted that closer vowels have more room for variability in front-back articulation than do opener vowels, but this variation is not represented in Shibles's matrix, rather it is contradicted by the square shape of his matrix. Accordingly, Shibles is actually able to give rather less information in his matrix than the IPA can in its vowel chart.

Finally, Shibles seems to contradict himself. This can be seen with reference to his statements of equivalence. He states that 'Every vowel may be defined in terms of every other vowel. Example: [ɰ = ɥ]' (p. 45), but then goes on in the same paragraph to say (of two other alternates) that 'these latter two equivalents may be used only to locate sounds between two adjacent symbols', thus apparently denying that these are equivalents at all. Less importantly, perhaps, he includes [ə] in his chart although it is 'redundant' (p. 44) or 'unnecessary' (p. 45).

In short, not only does Shibles seem unaware of other, more complete, attempts to extend the IPA chart (e.g. Canepari 1983), his own version distorts the IPA and fails to provide a coherent alternative to it.

#### *Phonemic and phonetic transcriptions*

Although acknowledging a distinction between the meaning of symbols put between phonemic slants and those put between phonetic brackets (p. 38), Shibles appears to make the error of confusing the

two, and failing to realise that a motivation for a good phonemic transcription may conflict with a motivation for a good phonetic transcription. He expects transcriptions which are basically phonemic in import to seek out the virtues of a narrowly phonetic system. For example, he complains (p. 48) that '[i] is used to mean [ɪ]' and likewise that [ɔ] is used in place of 'the correct sound' [o] in Daniel Jones's transcription system. Now, it may not be phonetically accurate to say that the vowel sound in the English word *kit* is [i], but it is unobjectionable to say that the vowel in the English word *kit* is /i/ within a system that is gaining in economy by marking length but not the concomitant quality distinctions. Economy of symbols is, in itself, a virtue in a phonemic system (Lass 1984:25), and Jones's system is a phonemic one.

What Shibles refers to as 'the either-or fallacy' (p. 50) equally reduces to a distinction between phonetic symbols and phonemic symbols. I am not convinced that the phrase 'voiced stop' is an oxymoron (as Shibles claims, p. 51), but even if it were there would be no problem in using the symbol [b] to represent the sound at the beginning of the English word *bet* since it has more vocal fold vibration than the sound at the beginning of *pet* and 'it is desirable to substitute more familiar consonant letters for less familiar ones, when such a substitution can be made without causing ambiguity' (IPA 1949:12). To say that to do this 'lacks descriptive precision' (p. 50) equally fails to distinguish between the transcription and the conventions for the interpretation of that transcription (Abercrombie 1964:22-24); every transcription relies on such conventions, and they can provide the precision that Shibles appears to believe cannot be given.

Shibles appears to believe that if only a transcription were given that was phonetically accurate, learners would have far fewer problems with English allophony. He says (p. 39)

For the language teacher or learner there are no universal phonemic rules of pronunciation which will allow one to correctly pronounce English. The rules, even if known, would be so complex as to preclude their memorization and employment. If on the other hand, a dictionary with IPA transcription were provided for the pronunciation of each word, each could be pronounced correctly.

Apart from the oxymoron of 'universal phonemic rules' which it is perhaps better to ignore, I find it hard to believe that a transcription such as [p]l̥ɑ̃+ːnt̥h̥d̥h̥ (or even worse, one using the alphanumeric system Shibles advocates (p. 41)) is going to be more useful for the learner than [plɑːntɪd], or lead to a better overall pronunciation. If Shibles has evidence to the contrary, perhaps he should have presented it. My own classroom experience is that more complex transcriptions confuse rather than help students. I would also expect that learning to pronounce English properly was partly a process of acquiring subconsciously the appropriate allophones.

There is another problem here which Shibles apparently ignores: not even RP, let alone 'American Pronunciation', is entirely monolithic. Some speakers say something more like ['sɪtɪ], others something more like ['sɪtɪ] (I omit the length marks deliberately); some speakers say [təɪ] others say [tɑː] and so on. Shibles apparently expects there to be a single correct answer on all occasions (as when he discusses pronunciations of the word *poor*, p. 50, place names, p. 51, or the syllabification of English words, p. 53). 'The Northumbrian dialect uses [ɛ]' he states unequivocally (p. 40); sometimes some speakers do, but not all of them all of the time.

#### *What is the standard?*

'The standard of pronunciation,' Shibles says (p. 46), 'is only as accurate as its symbolism. A standard not represented by IPA symbolism is of questionable value.' Later he says 'The problem arises that the phonetics [I think this means the symbols, but it is not entirely clear; LB] given by various sources differs. Thus, the phonetic standard is corrupted and equivocal.' There are at least two things wrong here. Firstly, and most importantly, 'the standard of pronunciation' can surely exist independent of any transcription of it. We have no IPA transcription of any standard of pronunciation used before the twentieth century (since the IPA was not in existence at that time), but there were still standards of pronunciation. We appear to be seeing a confusion between a thing and its description. However, even if, by some strange use of language, 'standard of pronunciation' is intended to mean 'standardised transcription', it should not be beyond the wit of Shibles to translate between the various transcrip-

tion systems to see whether or not they agree; there should be no equivocation on what the sources describe or recommend.

#### *Phonetic accuracy*

Given the statement (p. 39) that 'phonetics must be returned to phonetics' and the demand for high-class phonetics that precedes it, complaints about mistranscriptions (e.g. p. 49) and about the failure to use symbols for sounds which are found (e.g. p. 52), there is some irony in transcriptions which are apparently either inaccurate or filtered through the perceptions of Shibles's own phonological system. For example, on p. 48 Shibles states that /r/ 'in AP [...] is actually [ɹ]'. If it is, it is phonetically very different from that which is usually transcribed [ɹ] at the beginning of an RP word like *red*. Shibles at the very least is missing a chance to illustrate the superiority of his own system over the IPA. Wells (1982:490) suggests that the general American /r/ is in many positions a sound for which the IPA still has no generally agreed symbol, a 'molar' /r/. As a second example, Shibles's own transcription of the Australian pronunciation of the word *Australia* (p. 65) as [austɹaɪljɹ] raises several questions. The initial [au] looks as though it has been influenced by the spelling. The [aɪ] diphthong might be filtered through the perceptions of a speaker from some other dialect area, for whom this vowel is likely to sound like the vowel in their version of *bite*; the first element is usually rather more retracted and the second rather less close and peripheral than this transcription suggests. The final [ɹ] seems totally implausible unless the word was immediately followed by one beginning with a vowel in the text from which it was transcribed – this is not a normal citation form, though the final vowel might sound like an /r/ to a rhotic speaker. Why are we given no information about the secondary articulation of the liquids? I have cited a single example, but there are plenty of others that might have been mentioned.

#### *Conclusion*

Shibles may well be right that it would be helpful for learners if the major reference works could agree on a transcription for English; he

should take heart from the fact that there is far less variation now than there was a decade or so ago. He may well also be right that the classification of the IPA would be more helpful for the learner and for the scholar comparing dialects if it provided rather more labels for active and passive articulators – although here it should be pointed out that it does provide diacritics for fine distinctions to be noted when necessary, and it does allow composite labels such as 'sub-lamino-post-alveolar'; in any case, to judge from the transcriptions given, IPA-S does not greatly improve on matters in this area. He is almost certainly right that some really accurate transcriptions of actual speech would be helpful for the establishment of better phonologies. But even the few points to which I have drawn attention here should make it clear that this article is unlikely to convince anyone of the validity of his viewpoint or to lead to any changes in practice. We could go on to raise a host of other questions such as What does the title of the article mean? (The phrase 'English and its dialects' seems to imply that English exists independently of its dialects.) Why, in a 'comprehensive' bibliography is there nothing about New Zealand English dated later than 1966? The list continues. Having one's heart in the right place on some issues does not excuse sloppiness in presentation and argumentation.

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