

**TRANSCRIBING NEW ZEALAND
ENGLISH VOWELS**

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Writing about the problems of transcription, Bloomfield and Bolling (1927:125) argue that the linguists' habit of 'cluttering up our pages with queer-looking symbols' is both unnecessary and harmful. It is probably partly responsible for the fact that, as they put it, linguistics 'repels instead of attracting many who should be its closest friends' (123). For those who are not repelled, the artificial difficulty of learning to distinguish and manipulate unfamiliar shapes absorbs effort and attention better devoted to the inherent problems of language study. It is inevitable that linguists, being familiar with the symbols, should underestimate the difficulty involved in mastering them, but one suspects that some linguists welcome these complications; some sets of symbols for transcription appear to include as many queer-looking symbols as the IPA principles permit. This being so, the fiftieth anniversary of Bloomfield's *Language* seems an appropriate occasion to reiterate his strictures and to show how New Zealand English might be transcribed if we wanted to minimize the number of exotic shapes.

In the British edition of that work, Bloomfield (1935: 103-4) points out that 'there has arisen a convention of transcribing British English not by the symbols here indicated in accord with the principles of the IPA alphabet, but by means of queer symbols which are intended to remind the reader, irrelevantly enough, of the difference between English and French vowel phonemes'. Bloomfield is referring to symbols like æ and ʌ. These and other odd shapes are still widely used in transcribing British and New Zealand English. For example, Wells (1982:609) uses all of the following letters for representing vowels of New Zealand English: ɑ, e, i, o, u; a, æ, ɪ, ɔ, ʊ; ɒ, ɐ, ɜ, ʌ. Hawkins (1973) also uses fourteen letters, omitting o and

adding ϵ . In this he departs from the principles of the International Phonetic Association (1949:7) which recommends the use of roman letters as far as possible. No doubt there are unpublished sets of symbols in use for New Zealand English which are comparable in this respect. Wells' and Hawkins' systems are based on Gimson's. Gimson (1962:92) himself outlines an alternative system similar to the one presented here. He describes it as 'logical, elegant, and economical' (v), but decides that it is not the most suitable for his purposes. I have not seen such a system proposed for New Zealand English. This would probably not justify its publication here if the differences between British and New Zealand English vowels did not make the system strikingly different from Gimson's (and Bloomfield's) simpler system for the former. If we were devising a phonetic orthography for a newly discovered language just like New Zealand English, the vowels might well be represented as follows.

We can begin with the short vowels, of which there are six. There is one low vowel, as in the word *strut*. There are two mid vowels, front as in *trap*, and back as in *lot*. There are three high vowels: front as in *dress*, central as in *kit*, and back as in *foot*. In IPA terms, the low vowel is open, the mid vowels about half open, and the high vowels about half close. (This auditory analysis is in line with the acoustic data published by Maclagan 1982.) Only the back vowels are rounded. In Table I the low vowel is shown in the same column as the high central one, but 'indifferent' may be more appropriate than 'central' for the former.

Table I. Short Vowels of New Zealand English

	Front	Central	Back
High	i	e	u
Mid	e		o
Low		a	

Since there is only one low short vowel, we can use the letter a for it. We can use i for the high front vowel, and e for the mid front. For the high back vowel, an ordinary u is appropriate, and for the mid back, o. For the high central vowel we need a nonroman letter: ϵ . This is graphically more distinctive than the alternatives: \ddot{i} , I, ι . Using y would permit us to use an ordinary typewriter, but its IPA phonetic value makes it inappropriate. Employing the symbols in Table I, the words

cited above will be transcribed /strat, trep, lot, dris, ket, fut/.

Turning to the long vowels, we find that three are monophthongal, and each of these is similar in quality to one of the short vowels. The vowel of *brass* is like that of *strut*, the vowel of *sauce* is like that of *foot*, and the vowel of *nurse* is like that of *kit*. We might represent these by adding a length mark to the symbol for the short vowel, but the IPA has always recommended that 'Diacritic marks should be avoided, being trying for the eyes and troublesome to write' (1949: cover 3). We therefore simply double the letter standing for the short vowel, giving the transcriptions /braas/, /suus/, and /næs/. The most noticeable difference in quality between the pairs of short and long vowels is between /ə/ and /æə/, the long vowel being rather rounded. The vowel of *sauce* is traditionally linked with the short vowel of *lot*, but in General NZ English it is much nearer to that of *foot*. In Maclagan's (1982) acoustic study, the first formant of the *sauce* vowel is not between that of *lot* and that of *foot*, but lower than the latter. Translated into auditory terms, this means the *sauce* vowel is even higher (closer) than the *foot* vowel. Maclagan's study also confirms that the *strut* and *brass* vowels are virtually identical in quality.

We now take up the diphthongal long vowel phonemes. I will assume there are nine. Six of these fall into three pairs, both members of each pair beginning with the same short vowel, which is /a/ in *price* and *goat*, /e/ in *face* and *house*, and /ɛ/ in *fleece* and *goose*. One member of each pair ends in an unrounded relatively close front vowel or semivowel which we represent with j. The other ends in a rounded semivowel which we represent with w. We choose these rather than i and u because native speakers clearly hear this element as non-syllabic when another vowel follows. The six words just cited will therefore be transcribed /prajs/, /gawt/, /fejs/, /hews/, /flejs/, /gəws/. In Maclagan's data the last two vowels are monophthongs, but Wells (1982:607) and other phoneticians hear them as diphthongs at least some of the time. I represent them as diphthongs because this representation can cover both variants more readily than a monophthongal representation. Since the range of the vowel in /kæt/ overlaps the range of the second element of the /prajs/ vowel, it is not surprising that they should sometimes merge in /əj/, giving it a monophthongal realization. A seventh diphthong, exemplified by /nujz/ *noise*, begins with the highest back short vowel. Two other diphthongs begin with the highest front and back short vowels, and end with the central vowel /ə/. These occur in the words /niə/

near and /tuə/ *tour*.

I referred above to two published sets of symbols for the vowels of New Zealand English, each of which employs at least nine letters not in the roman alphabet. The system proposed here uses only one nonroman letter: ə. This is readily confused with roman a in writing, but we are free to use cursive a for the vowel of *strut* in written transcriptions.

I mentioned that Gimson considers and rejects a transcription system for British English comparable to this one as unsuitable for his purposes. He does not mention a more powerful reason. It would have been most disloyal of Gimson to reject the traditional system of his mentor Daniel Jones in favour of one devised by American strangers. We are not constrained by this consideration in choosing a transcription system for New Zealand English. That apart, if our purposes are different from Gimson's, as they are likely to be if we are not writing a book to describe the pronunciation of British English and compare it with other varieties, there is no reason for us to adopt without question his system or one which departs from it only in minor respects.

Phonetic transcription traditionally comes near the beginning of introductions to the study of the English language and language in general, so that students are less experienced when they meet this topic than when they meet other aspects of linguistic study. From a pedagogical point of view it is therefore particularly desirable that the transcription system taught be as simple as possible. The younger the students are--if for instance the scientific study of language begins in secondary school rather than in university--the more important this consideration becomes. If we can have this simplicity without abandoning well-established principles of phonetic orthography, it is difficult to justify the continued employment of a system weighed down by queer shapes which are not required.

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