

English Phonetics & Phonology

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Topic 1: Fundamentals of Phonetics and Phonology

Slide 2: Phonetics vs Phonology

- **Phonetics:** The study of physical production and perception of speech sounds (articulation, acoustics, and auditory aspects).
- **Phonology:** The study of how sounds function within a particular language or languages (sound system, patterns, and rules).
- Phonetics describes actual sound qualities; phonology describes abstract sound units (phonemes) and their systematic use.
- Phonetics deals with how sounds are made (speech organs), phonology deals with how sounds contrast to make meaning.

Slide 3: Phonemes and Pronunciation

- A **phoneme** is the smallest sound unit that can distinguish meaning (e.g. /p/ vs /b/ in *pin* vs *bin*).
- **Minimal pairs** (like “pin” /pɪn/ vs “pen” /pɛn/) show that two different sounds are separate phonemes in English.
- English spelling is irregular, so phonemes often do not match letters; e.g., “enough” is pronounced /ɪˈnʌf/, where the letters do not directly indicate these sounds.
- Phonetic vs phonemic: The same sound (like [t]) may vary (aspirated [tʰ] or unreleased [t̚]) but still represent one phoneme /t/.

Slide 4: Phonetic Transcription & the IPA

The International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) provides a consistent set of symbols for all speech sounds. It organizes sounds by articulatory features (rows for place, columns for manner for consonants; quadrilateral for vowel height/backness). Each English sound (phoneme) is mapped to one IPA symbol (e.g. /ʃ/ for the “sh” in *sheep*).

- **Broad vs narrow transcription:** Broad transcription uses slashes /.../ and only distinguishes phonemes (e.g. /t/); narrow transcription uses brackets [...] to show fine details (e.g. aspiration, diacritics).
- Phonetic transcription (using the IPA chart) is essential for accurate pronunciation guides in dictionaries and for teaching correct sounds.
- Consistency of IPA helps compare sounds across accents and languages without confusion.