

Transcription

Transcription is the use of symbols to represent sounds or sound sequences in written form. There are different systems of phonetic symbols. One of the most commonly used systems of phonetic symbols is the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA).

A distinction is commonly made between two general types of transcription:

1. **Narrow Transcription:** A narrow transcription, also called a phonetic transcription, is one that shows phonetic details (for example, aspiration, length, etc.), by using a wide variety of symbols and, in many cases, diacritics. A systematic phonetic transcription shows all the phonetic details that can be recorded.
2. **Broad Transcription:** A broad transcription, also called an impressionistic transcription, is one that uses a simple set of symbols and does not show a great deal of phonetic detail. A phonemic transcription is a broad transcription that shows all and only those sounds that are distinctive phonemes in the language being transcribed.

Thus, one particular pronunciation of the English word 'little' may be transcribed using the IPA as /'lɪtəl/ or ['lɪtəl̩]. The broad, phonemic transcription, placed between slashes, indicates merely that the word ends with phoneme /l/. But the narrow, allophonic transcription, placed between square brackets, indicates that this final /l/ ([l̩]) is dark (velarized).

The advantage of the narrow transcription is that it can help learners to get exactly the right sound, and allows linguists to make detailed analyses of language variation. The disadvantage is that a narrow transcription is rarely representative of all speakers of a language. Moreover, it involves a larger number of symbols which may be unfamiliar to non-specialists.

The advantage of the broad transcription is that it can be applied across a more diverse language community. It is thus more appropriate for the pronunciation data in foreign language dictionaries, which may discuss phonetic details in the preface but rarely give them for each entry. A rule of thumb in many linguistics contexts is therefore to use a narrow

transcription when it is necessary for the point being made, but a broad transcription whenever possible.