

ELT Ireland bulletin



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Why is The RP Chart in Ireland?

by John Whipple (ELT Makespace)

Using a presentation of a single historic British accent as a teaching tool in Ireland has placed Irish ELT in an odd predicament. The symbol set used to make up the RP phonemic chart (The Chart) in British courseware throughout Ireland often conjures up skepticism or at least justified criticism. Reactions to The Chart have often been repressed in Irish ELT. This is to the detriment of casual research, debate and the development of ELT in Ireland.

This article aims to equip readers for staffroom discussion about the place of privilege given to The Chart by its ubiquitous inclusion in courseware. This article tells the story of The Chart and contrasts it with the more flexible, open and well-maintained International Phonetic Alphabet. It introduces the International Phonetic Association that created it and closes with some research-based suggestions for pronunciation teaching and learning. It has been found that teaching pronunciation should focus on those aspects that are not the primary visual focus of either IPA or The Chart.

The Chart

Like a 1980s tape player or 1890s grammar book, The Chart is a largely historic artefact. It is not an impediment to learning, but neither is it a complete, efficient or fully accurate tool to describe the majority of accents in modern Ireland or the UK. It is perhaps not the best way to introduce the English sound system to the learners in our schools.

“teachers using their own voice in lessons have to confess significant differences from The Chart”

English language teachers using their own voice in lessons have to confess significant differences from The Chart or playfully mock the sounds described. This is because The Chart in our courseware, syllabi and often on our classroom walls does not match our own speech unless we conform to the norms of RP (Received Pronunciation). But every day the RP accent arguably becomes less relevant for our learners. Accents across the Anglophone world are developing and yet courseware is not.

The Chart has played a significant role in shaping teacher’s minds. Its clear layout has drawn an indelible image of pronunciation. But it creates a dubious standard, which purposely or inadvertently renders intelligible and/or native accents that diverge as ‘substandard’ or ‘alternative’. This particular map or Chart of sounds was not designed with our time, place, learners or teachers in mind. Its reconsideration should start with an understanding of its history and should not end before considering recent research in pronunciation teaching.

History of the International Phonetic Association

The symbols on The Chart began their use as sound symbols in the 1880s when a French linguist, Paul Passey, was leading a group of French and English Foreign Language Teachers from France and the UK. To address the insufficiencies of the French and English alphabets as tools for teaching or discussing pronunciation objectively, they decided to adopt, and adapt, a phonetic alphabet.

THE INTERNATIONAL PHONETIC ALPHABET (revised to 1993, corrected 1996)

SONANTS (MOBILE)											
	Bilabial	Labiodental	Dental	Alveolar	Postalveolar	Retrolflex	Palatal	Velar	Uvular	Pharyngeal	Glottal
voice	p b			t d		ʈ ɖ	c ɟ	k ɡ	q ɢ		ʔ
l	m	ɱ		n		ɳ	ɲ	ŋ	ɴ		
	β			ɾ				ʀ			
or F1p				ɽ		ɻ					
ative	ɸ β	f v	θ ð	s z	ʃ ʒ	ʂ ʐ	ç ʝ	x ɣ	χ ʁ	ħ ʕ	h
nal				ɸ β							
ative											
oalant		ʋ		ɹ		ɻ	ɰ	ʋ			
nal				ɻ		ɻ	ɰ	ʋ			
oalant				ɻ		ɻ	ɰ	ʋ			

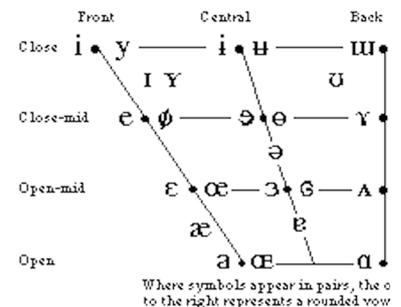
These symbols appear in pairs, the one to the right represents consonant. Shaded areas denote articulations judged impossible.

SONANTS (NON-PULMONIC)

Clicks		Voiced implosives		Ejectives	
Bilabial	ɓ	Bilabial		Examples	
Dental	ɗ	Dental/alveolar	ɗ̥	Bilabial	
Postalveolar	ɠ	Dental	ɠ̥	Dental/alveolar	
Postalveolar	ɠ	Velar	ɠ̥	Velar	
Alveolar lateral	ɠ	Velar	ɠ̥	Alveolar lateral	

IPA SYMBOLS

Voiced bilabial approximant	ɸ	Alveolar lateral fricative
Voiced bilabial approximant	ɸ	Alveolar lateral flap
Voiced bilabial approximant	ɸ	Simultaneous ʃ and x
Voiced epiglottal fricative		
Voiced epiglottal fricative		Difficulties and double articulations can be represented by two symbols joined by a tie bar if necessary
Epiglottal plosive		



Updated version of the official chart from the International Phonetic Association.

Pic by the IPA

This group of teachers named itself the International Phonetic Association. In the absence of audio technology, a phonetic alphabet was absolutely essential for clear communication of their observations and ideas.

These teachers understood that they were meeting the needs of more than one language community. Phonetic, not phonological, was apt in their case. Phonetics is the study of all speech sounds; Phonology studies the sound system of single languages. Other linguists and philologists joined and the impact and rigour of their Phonetic Alphabet grew to truly merit the term International. They continue to this day and are open to new membership. The Association updates the alphabet transparently through a system of motions, proposals and votes.

Accurate transcription for the diffusion of knowledge is a goal of the Association. The diffusion of phonetics knowledge is why John Wells (IPA President 2003-2007) worked directly with programmers to make sure IPA symbols were accessible to users of the World Wide Web. It is why the IPA became the default pronunciation guide for Wikipedia, itself an interactive, astonishingly thorough, relentlessly updated resource on phonetics.

History of the International Phonetic Alphabet

The entire International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) symbol set dwarfs The Chart in accuracy, scope and openness. It contains over 100 letter-like symbols and over 40 diacritics, little marks to indicate breathy voice, nasalisation, and so on. It is a mistake to say that The Chart on our walls is the IPA as much as it is to say that this sentence is in Latin because English is written in Roman script.

Though inaccessible and daunting 10 years ago, many fully interactive IPA charts are freely available online today. Each symbol is a shorthand symbol of its articulation and the name of the articulation is what the symbol stands for.

It has gone through numerous revisions as new languages, dialects and accents were discovered or studied in greater depth. The latest revision was in 2005: much more up-to-date than The Chart presented in our textbooks describing RP from 1962.

A very brief history of The Chart

The symbols on The Chart were selected by A.C. Gimson and publicised in his 1962 book, setting a standard for good British pronunciation. It was based on the IPA symbol set and was meant to exemplify English speech through the pronunciation of wealthy natives of southern England. It sought to describe the articulations and sounds popular of that class, nationality and decade. The accent described was called Received Pronunciation.

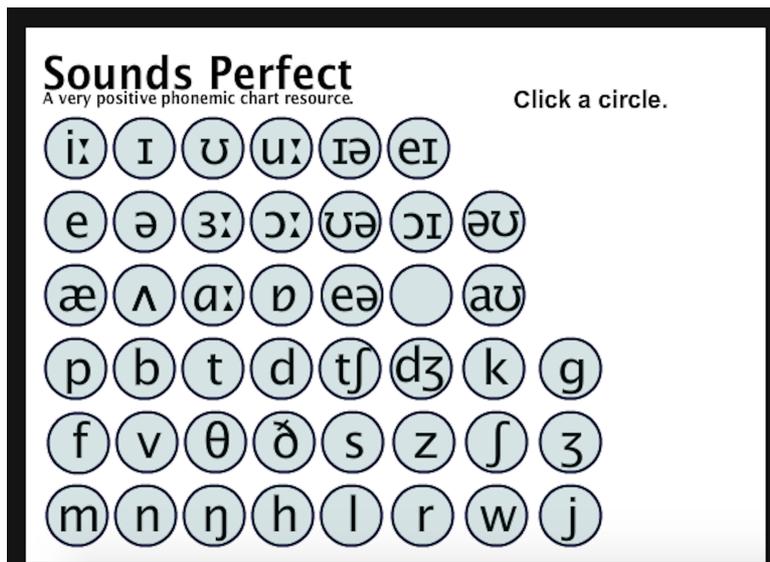
“Though inaccessible and daunting 10 years ago, many fully interactive IPA charts are freely available online today.”

While writing *English Phonetics and Phonology: A Practical Course*, Peter Roach had revised the symbols to update the descriptions of RP from Gimson's 1962 chart as early as 1983. During the editing process stakeholders in ELT publishing steered the editor away from the updating the symbol set for expediency. This was to the detriment of description, accuracy and perhaps credibility, even in England. Regardless, this symbol set is still promoted as a modern standard in UK ELT publishing and training.

It can be argued that any model is worthwhile and that the diffusion of RP is not the goal of The Chart but a convenient shared model. Roach says that teachers need to differentiate between models and goals (Roach, 1998 p6). Which role does The Chart play in the Irish ELT classroom? Do we use The Chart as a model merely because it accords with publications in our schools? Is a 1962 British sample the best model for our students understanding and use?

New Directions

These stories are a part of our history as ELT practitioners. The story of origin of The Chart is particularly important for teachers in Ireland. A short glimpse at where we came from enables clearer thinking about where we are and what we can hope to do. Research is focused on how pronunciation teaching and learning affects students' abilities



An alternative version of the chart made by the author on ELT Makespace using phrases rather than isolated words a models

Pic by J. Whipple

to engage in discourse, how it affects their identity and how technologies are being created and critically used to teach pronunciation (Jenkins, 2004).

Since 2000, researchers have agreed that pronunciation learning should focus on improving intelligibility (Levis 2005; Munro and Derwing 2011). This is why researchers urge teachers to shift away from the topic of the symbols for consonants and vowels and focus instead on stress in sentences and words, intonation and rhythm (called suprasegmental features).

Noticing these items, the suprasegmentals, is the first step in understanding them (Schmidt, 1990). Using suprasegmentals well is what makes the most impact on intelligibility (Levis, 2005). This is why teachers should learn more about where the symbols come from and what they represent. The IPA presents a better path towards more useful understanding.

Three Practical Suggestions

1. Stress and how the mouth works should be studied by teachers and their students: The pressing task is to raise learner awareness of how syllable stress is assigned and why certain syllables and words are produced more prominently. Empowering learners to notice differences in vowel sounds is still helpful in the prominent syllable of a sentence or word. A practical solution might be to learn about articulatory phonetics for one of your classes. Wikipedia, as noted previously, is a very well maintained and free resource on the subject.

2. Integrate pronunciation more frequently, focusing primarily on suprasegmentals: Keep pronunciation integrated in your grammar and lexis lessons just like you keep spelling and punctuation integrated in your writing work.

3. Use Pronunciation Resources from outside the Publisher Suites: Pronunciation resources are not profitable. Publishers can sideline developing them because pronunciation is not examined. Excellent resources exist but are usually not bought or supplied by publishers. Newer sites like EnglishCentral or RachelsEnglish or resources like Richard Cauldwell's CoolSpeech and StreamingSpeech are excellent resources because they use recordings in helpful ways. Follow up on your use of them with conversation, criticism and wish lists with ideas for small helpful things.

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Epilogue

Perhaps The Chart in its current form belongs in our past. It certainly needs criticism and reimagining. The IPA is a resource few teachers have begun to exploit. But neither focus visually on the principle needs of our pronunciation learners. Intelligibility is aided best by focusing on suprasegmentals in an integrated way, using the technology all around us. Many resources exist and many more need creation but schools and teachers should discuss their objectives.

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