**ER 5.1 Sounds, and /fəʊnetɪk skrɪpt/**

As we say in the text, phonetic script is a way of ‘writing sounds down’. But doesn’t normal spelling do this? No, it doesn’t. The spelling of words like *rough* and *cup* show you that the same sound can be written in more than one way. In these words the vowel – the phonetic symbol is /ʌ/ – is written as ‘ou’ in the first word, ‘u’ in the second. You might like to think of some more examples in English: there are very many. The opposite is also true, that the same written letters can stand for more than one sound. So the written ‘ea’ in *heard* is pronounced /ɜː/, while in *beard* it is pronounced /ɪə/. Again, try to find more examples of written letters pronounced in more than one way. These differences between spelling and pronunciation are discussed again in 7.3.

Examples like these show that if we want an accurate way of writing sounds down, we need to use a separate alphabet. It’s worth consulting a linguistics handbook to find out something detailed about phonetics and its script; Knight (2012) is one that deals specifically with these areas. What follows is just the barest of information.

Sounds can be roughly divided into consonants and vowels. Consonants are produced by the tongue touching, or coming close to touching, parts of the mouth. For example, if those parts of the mouth are the lips and the teeth, the sound is described as ‘labio-dental’ (from the Latin *labium* for ‘lip’, and *dens* for ‘tooth’). English /f/ and /v/ are labio-dental sounds. Consonants are also classified according to the kind of contact made. ‘Plosives’ for example are produced the rapid release of the touching parts of the mouth. English /p/ is a plosive; in fact it is a ‘bi-labial plosive’ because the parts of the mouth involved are the two lips. Yet another dimension for classifying consonants is whether they are ‘voiced’ or ‘voiceless’. Take a look at ER5.2 for a description of this distinction. Take a look too at the ‘phonetic symbols used’ list at the beginning of this book. You’ll see that most (but not all) of the phonetic symbols for consonants look like alphabet letters you are familiar with. Among the exceptions are the symbols /θ/and /ð/, the sounds for the ‘th’ at the beginning of the word *thing* and *the* respectively.

And vowels? One important dimension for the classification of vowels relates to tongue position. When a vowel is pronounced, the tongue makes a ‘hump’ in the mouth. The highest point of that hump will change according to the vowel. Two axes are relevant here. One is high → low, and vowels are classified as ‘close’, ‘half-close’, ‘half-open’ and ‘open’, according to the position of the highest part of the tongue in relation to the top or bottom of the mouth. The other axis describing the hump’s position is front → back, and along this dimension vowels are described as ‘front’, ‘central’ or ‘back’. In the word *seat*, where the vowel is /iː/, the highest point of the tongue is in the top front section of the mouth. So the vowel is described as ‘close front’. The /ɑː/ vowel in the word *car*, on the other hand, is pronounced with the highest point of the tongue in the bottom back section, and the vowel is therefore ‘open back’.

Tongue position is not the only dimension important in classifying vowels. Another is ‘perceived length’. English vowels are often described as ‘short’ or ‘long’. The short /ɪ/ in *hit* and the long /iː/ in *heat* are examples, and the symbol [ː] is often used to indicate a long vowel. The word ‘perceived’ is important because in purely acoustic terms the principles governing actual sound length are in fact extremely complex – in some circumstances a so-called long vowel may not in fact be that long, nor a short vowel that short. Another classificatory dimension is lip position, with ‘rounded’ and ‘unrounded’ being the two commonly identified positions. Compare the rounded lip position in the sound /uː/ in ‘two’, and the unrounded position of /ɪ/ in the word ‘hit’.

The vowel sounds we have been talking about are ‘pure’ vowels, or monophthongs. As you produce these vowels, the sound remains relatively constant throughout, however long the sound is continued. For example, if you artificially extend, for as long as you have breath, the vowel /ɑː/ in the word *car* (‘kɑːɑːɑːɑːɑːɑːɑːɑː’), the vowel sound remains more or less the same. But in a diphthong, the sound ‘deliberately’ changes direction – you ‘glide’ from one sound to another. Examples are the /eɪ/, /əʊ/ and /ɪə/ in RP *pay, low* and *peer*. In RP the second element of a diphthong will be an /ɪ/, /ʊ/, or /ə/, as in the examples above.

If you want to use phonetic transcription yourself, there is one elementary – but not always easy – lesson on learn. It is that you really must ‘think sound, not spelling’. For example, the phonetic transcription of the word *have* in RP is /hæv/. But, you might think, there’s an ‘e on the end of the word. But that’s ‘thinking spelling’. The ‘e’ is not pronounced, so it will not appear in the phonetic transcript. Notice also the phonetic symbol /k/, which occurs twice in the title of this sample (/fəʊnetɪk skrɪpt/). In spelling we use the letter ‘c’ both times, but the phonetic symbol for this sound is /k/. So when you ‘think sound’, /k/ it is.