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WHY I WILL DEFINITELY LEARN THE IPA, AND WHY YOU SHOULD TOO!

by Brian Powers February 1, 2016 language learning

Nazioarteko alfabeto fonetikoak (*The International Phonetic Alphabet*) © 2005 IPA

ntsonanteak (Aire-etorriaz ekoiztutakoak).

Ahospunak ↓	Ezpainkariak	Ezpain-horzkariak	Horzkariak	Hobikariak	Sabaiaurrekoak	Irauliak (apikariak)	Sabaikariak	Belareak	Ubulareak	Faringealak	Glotalak
herkariak	p b		t d	t d		t d	c ʃ	k g	q ɢ		ʔ
durkariak	m	ɱ		n		ɳ	ɲ	ŋ	ɴ		
rdarkariak	β			r					ʀ		
ak (tap/flap)		ⱱ		ɾ		ɽ					
rzkariak	ɸ β	f v	θ ð	s z	ʃ ʒ	ʂ ʐ	ç ʝ	x ɣ	χ ʁ	ħ ʕ	h ɦ
bokari rzkariak				ɬ ɮ							
rbilkariak		ʋ		ɹ		ɻ	j	ɰ			
bokari rbilkariak				l		ɭ	ʎ	ʟ			

.boloak, kutxa batean bi agertzen direnean: ezkerrekoa ahoskabea, eskuinekoa ahostuna. Kutxa grisetoak ahoskagaitz

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I really like the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), as the title of this article clearly states. I

mean, I *really* like it. I think it's pretty much one of the best things ever. Okay, well maybe that's an exaggeration but it's still pretty cool.

However, not everyone agrees with me (for reasons beyond my comprehension...). My good friend Erik, who writes over at View from the Town, the language blog that accompanies Parleremo, [very much disagrees with me](#). So I'm here to explain to you just how amazingly *wrong* he is...

...sorta...



A little background information

The IPA was originally devised in 1886 by a French linguist named [Paul Plassy](#) and a bunch of other guys who would become the International Phonetics Association, or "*l'Association phonétique internationale*", as they would have *actually* called it, because France. In 1897 the fancy new writing system was of course christened the "International Phonetic Alphabet."

IPA was initially based on the [Romic alphabet](#) spelling reform for English but they very much wanted to adapt it to suit other languages as well, and create a system that could be used to help anyone pronounce anything in any language. Pretty cool, huh?

Moving on...

This is why Erik is wrong...at least partially...

1. Unwieldy

The first point made is that IPA is “unwieldy”. He goes on to state that the characters are a bit arcane and seem unnatural, as though they belong solely in academia rather than imposing their abstract horror on us mere mortals.

In this I disagree wholeheartedly. IPA isn't especially cumbersome, you just don't know to use it. You never learned it. It's like saying that Cyrillic is unwieldy just because it's not Latin and you just don't know it. That's about it, really.

If someone actually took the time to teach people the world over IPA in our standard issue grammar/language classes in secondary school we'd all know it and we wouldn't have this problem. Yes, it's a new writing system, but at least in my opinion, learning a new writing system is just about the easiest part of learning a new language. (Unless of course you're learning something that uses ideograms or is otherwise ridiculously different from your own.)

His next point regarding its practicality isn't entirely invalid though:

“ This is the age of computers, where almost everything is transmitted and stored in a digital fashion, usually requiring input from a keyboard. It is common enough now for people to have multiple layouts so they can type in different languages, IPA setups are harder to find and install. Even if you find one that works, the number of fonts the symbols can be displayed in is very limited.

He's not really wrong here. Whenever I want to use IPA I have to go use this thing; ipa.typeit.org. As cool as knowing this exists is, it is an inconvenience to visit a separate website just to dig up the characters I'm looking for.

It may seem a bit archaic in the digital age but again, I think that if we had a massive, global overhaul

when it comes to IPA usage and it was a commonly used system we would have found a way to integrate it smoothly with our tech, perhaps with massive communicative benefits.

2. Overkill for the average Joe

Do we really need to be using the IPA? Of course not. I went most of my life without it, and I imagine you have too. There're lots of things in life that we don't need, and yeah, if you're not some flavor of linguist you probably wouldn't have really thought much of it until now.

But that doesn't mean we *shouldn't* learn it.

The argument being made here is that we can function just fine with the approximate pronunciations given to us "naturally" by the language(s) we already speak. An example of this would be "phonetics": (fo-neh-tix).

Yeah, okay, sure, sorta? Not really?

See, this forces us to base the pronunciation of new words in a new language on that of our own. Yeah, you can come close, but you're not always going to come close enough and in some languages the nuances really, *really* matter. Furthermore this system of arbitrary phonology is virtually impossible to standardize. Not that IPA is easy to standardize either, but that's a separate issue.

Also, linguists throw things when they get angry. You can be sure to make them angry by using such instances of blatant barbarism.



You certainly *can* make the argument that one can simply learn the proper pronunciation through other means such as any audio course, music, TV or of course other speakers, but that doesn't mean that you shouldn't be taking advantage of every possible edge you can get your hands on, and sometimes I find it easier to understand how to properly pronounce something when I have a physical representation to mull over. Speakers are not always easy to follow, neither is music or any other resource. You should be using these tools too – you should be *emphasizing* them – but IPA allows you to look up individual words and sounds, especially when you're reading and come across words that aren't common in speech, sometimes even in your native language.

IPA makes it easy to almost visualize and to work through each and every sound you find and knowing a thing or two about phonetics and phonology can help you to properly conceptualize and produce these sounds without having to rely on another person. Diversification is key in language learning and IPA is just another tool to add to your repertoire.

3. It's hard to agree on

This isn't really true, either. In fact linguists pretty much agree on the vast majority of issues surrounding IPA. It's a more or less globally accepted system.

Linguists do from time to time disagree on what constitute “standard phonemes”, which symbols have become “obsolete” and the changes that non-standard symbols that have entered general usage or perhaps regional usage mean for the overall functionality of IPA. But since when have scholars ever really agreed on anything?

Furthermore IPA has been accused many times of being Eurocentric – and it pretty much is. IPA characters are based, sometimes loosely, on the Greek alphabet and Latin script.

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Quick lesson: Writing systems are not universal. In Western languages they're often a letter-set style in which both consonants and vowels are given equal value as letters, although some non-Western languages use similar systems as well, such as Korean Hanguul.

This contrasts sharply with abjads, commonly used in Semitic languages such as Arabic wherein only consonants are represented and vowels are provided by the intuition of the reader. Many

Asian countries use a lovely selection of writing systems that range from logograms (Mandarin) to syllabaries, (Japanese Hirigana and Katakana, but not Kanji, that's another logogram).

Beyond this there are pictographs and petroglyphs and a host of other fun little systems that could constitute their own article and that really begin to blur the edges of what does and does not constitute "writing".

Anyway, back to the topic at hand...

So IPA is, while capable of producing pretty much any phoneme you can think of, as well as the ones you can't think of, it still has its shortcomings as a global script. Explaining a writing system like this to someone with no real concept of what we [Westerners] usually think of as an alphabet doesn't exactly... work. You can't just break a logogram into individual phonemes without some serious hack n' slash.

This is to be expected of course. Late 19th century academics weren't exactly known for their complete and total understanding and acceptance of non-white cultures. These are the same folks who bring us preconceived notions of "savages" in loincloths and the brave soldiers who ~~systematically exterminated~~ saved them from their backwards ways. We're talking about the same guys who thought pith helmets and monocles were stylish.

However, not to be totally outdone here. My solution to this problem of conflicting systems that give certain weight and seem to pander more to certain languages than others is to simply teach everyone, everywhere, IPA, from an early age. Yeah, it's different, yeah, I realize this would be a huge undertaking and yeah, I realize that it's totally never going to happen, but hey, a guy can hope right?

And going even further beyond that, let's not miss the point that whether or not IPA is ethical, fair to all speakers of all languages, all cultures and all ways of life, it doesn't really matter to *you*. If you're reading this, you can follow the script.

As a language learner you don't usually need to concern yourself with the politics of a script. It's a tool you have at your disposal, it's not that hard to learn, just use it. Let the linguists decide how best to change it and simply be glad that such a thing exists to help you pronounce those weird Polish words.

Conclusion

IPA is cool. It really is. Do you need to learn it? No, not at all. Will it help you? Well, it helps me, and I can't speak for you but I'm willing to bet that it would.

I think we should all spend a little bit more time in secondary school learning this system alongside our native languages. Most people won't bother learning a foreign language for fun, but IPA can even help you with your *own* language(s).

English, for example, is an unfathomably large language when it comes to the size of its lexicon and even the most well read among us natives still manage to find words we've never seen before from time to time. With its varied origins and vocab-leeching ways, English can throw some serious curve balls when it comes to pronunciation. IPA can make hitting those balls a little easier.

Besides, knowing IPA totally makes you go from moron to turn-on in the eyes of your lovely linguist significant other. Guaranteed or your money back.

Wanna learn IPA?

Learning IPA really is a walk in the park compared to just about every other language thing you could be doing. In this case you have my full permission to set down your language studies for a week or so and give yourself the gift of phonology. You'll thank yourself later.

You can even take a Memrise course or two. Memrise offers a wide range of phonology courses for a variety of languages as well as a few courses that deal directly with IPA. And Memrise is awesome anyway and you should be using it.

You can check out a [list of those courses here](#).

In addition to this, and I just stumbled across this the other night, I found the most spectacular site to use as an IPA reference or to aid in learning it. It's this super cool website called, yeah, you guessed it, www.internationalphoneticalphabet.org. It's pretty much everything you could ever wish for in a website. It comes with sounds and graphs and charts and all sorts of odds and ends to make your wildest phonological dreams come true!

So what the hell are you still here for? Click the link and start learning the international phonetic alphabet!

Go forth and spread the good word!

