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# 1. The principles on which the IPA should be based

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## Introduction

As part of the preparation for the meeting on the revision of the International Phonetic Alphabet, I have been asked to write a short summary of my correspondence with a number of members of the Association on the principles on which the alphabet should be based. To this end, I have sought the views of the 34 respondents who gave first or second rank to this topic on the preregistration form for the 1989 Convention.

Unfortunately, by the time I was able to send out my letter with a few suggestive questions and the relevant passage from Ladefoged and Roach (1986: 25-6), only 13 scholars were able to send me their thoughts by the deadline or very shortly thereafter. A few of them offered penetrating remarks on the topic as a whole, others commented briefly on most or all of the principles, and some chose one or two principles for discussion.

## The historic principles

For the convenience of the reader, the principles are reprinted here:

1. There should be a separate letter for each distinctive sound; that is, for each sound which, being used instead of another, in the same language, can change the meaning of a word.
2. When any sound is found in several languages, the same sign should be used in all. This applies also to very similar shades of sound.
3. The alphabet should consist as much as possible of the ordinary letters of the Roman alphabet, as few new letters as possible being used.
4. In assigning values to the Roman letters, international usage should decide.
5. The new letters should be suggestive of the sounds they represent, by their resemblance to the old ones.
6. Diacritics should be avoided, being trying for the eyes and troublesome to read.

## Summary of thoughts

Perhaps the six principles should be kept in print for their historical interest. A good way to do it might be to promulgate new principles, while preserving the old ones in a short statement of the history of the Association. In this connection, it should be borne in mind that an early goal was the fostering of good writing systems for the languages of the world. This may no longer be an important aim of the Association.

Since principle 1 implies the concept of the phoneme, we could consider expanding and clarifying it to make room for various theoretical approaches to the choice of phonologically relevant units. At the same time, perhaps it is not our business to go out of our way to accommodate various approaches to phonological

theory or to take a particular stance; we are concerned, rather, with ways of representing graphically the human capacity for the production and perception of speech. In any event, to the extent that we are concerned with phonemic distinctiveness, do we want to obscure a basic relatedness, such as nasality or vowel length, between groups of phonemes by refusing to form symbols that combine a diacritic with one of several letters? (The latter point impinges upon principle 6.) In addition, we surely need a large enough array of symbols to handle all the phonetic categories permitted by human physiological and psychoacoustic constraints, even if they have not all been found as yet in languages.

Principle 2 is going to have to be clarified. There is a sense in which the reader can accept it without quibbling. If certain sounds have the same structural status in a number of languages but differ qualitatively in a rather limited way, we may be content to assign the same symbols to them for texts in each of the languages; however, for comparative analysis and for language teaching, it may be useful to write them differently.

Principle 3 does not seem troublesome, as it stands, although increasingly it will become diluted, as the alphabet has to accommodate more categories and more kinds of need.

Opinions range widely on principle 4, from rejection through skepticism to acceptance. We might ask whether there is really a reliable canon of international usage for Roman letters beyond correlation with rather gross phonetic categories. One interpretation offered is the notion that from nation to nation local orthographic biases might prevail. Another is that the phonological concept of markedness, together with universal occurrence, might guide us. In any case, principle 4 provides no guidance for the growing number of symbols that do not derive from Roman letters.

Principle 5 seems reasonable.

Principle 6, which seems to be in conflict with principle 3, bothers many of us. While avoiding excessive diacritics, which are hard to print and read, we certainly want to have a number of them available. They can be very useful for symbolizing systemic relations and for the notation of fine detail in field work. Indeed, principle 5 can sometimes best be carried out with the help of diacritics.

## Conclusion

Given the important advances in our field since the days of the founders of the Association, and the wider community of users of the alphabet, the principles of the IPA need to be revised somewhat as part of our undertaking to improve the alphabet itself. The collection of responses underlying the present summary will, I think, furnish an excellent starting point for a fruitful discussion and good outcome in Kiel.

## References

- LADEFOGED, P. and P. ROACH (1986). Revising the International Phonetic Alphabet: A plan. *Journal of the International Phonetic Association* 16(1), 22–9.

### Editor's Comment

It may be that the Kiel meeting should also address the question of whether additional, new principles are desirable. For example, the new alphabet, as revised in Kiel, may well not contain a symbol (as such) for a voiceless bilabial affricate released laterally. But the speech therapist or field linguist who encounters one, and feels the need to symbolize it for their work, should be given the principles so that they can devise a symbol in a systematic way. In addition, should there be explicit principles for the symbolization of tones or of prosody? Should the principles discuss – or even attempt to prioritize – specific criteria for devising a new symbol, such as articulatory versus auditory 'resemblance', or such as visual similarity of a letter versus its visual distinctiveness? If a principle relating to diacritics is kept, should there also be principles for the use of digraphs, or for upper-case Roman letters, or for any other devices for extending the alphabet?