The Music Shed

& The Business Shed

- A Creative Initiative

PO Box 964
Cambridge 3450
New Zealand
Ph: +64 7 823 9491

Beginner's Phonetics – A Simple Guide

This is intended to get you intrigued rather than fully educated! It also points you to where you can learn more, if you wish.

Singers don't just sing in their own language and are faced with the daunting task of learning (at least to pronounce) a number of foreign languages. One of the more recent additions to a singer's armoury has been the use of phonetics which can cut across the language barrier and allow the singer to make the correct sound by using a "special" alphabet.

Every language has a unique set of sounds that are used to build words. Indeed when we each learnt to speak we were taught these sounds and shown the words that went with them – so we learnt to speak.

Linguists call these sounds "phonemes" (fo neemes) and these sounds differentiate between words at the lowets (smallest) level.

Think about the following set of words – only a letter has changed, but the sound is completely different.

Sat – Set / Sin – Sir / Ton – Top.

Indeed, there are some word games that require you to get from one word to another by altering only one letter at a time.

The number of phonemes in each language varies. English has some 44 (it depends on accent), whilst Italian has about 25, as does German. There are two tables at the end of this article detailing some of the English vowel and consonant phonemes.

Linguists use the IPA – the International Phonetic Alphabet to describe and analyse the sound systems of languages. In IPA each sound is given a unique symbol which allows us to capture similarities and differences that are hidden by the written form. Cat and Kit for example – the sound at the start of the word is the same, though the letters are different. Look at the letter Y in various words and you will find it completely different. In that previous sentence Y in you and Y in completely differ from each other. How about silly young youths?

The following link is to the IPA's main site and is well worth time spent looking through it:

http://www.arts.gla.ac.uk/ipa/index.html

Vowels are sounds produced with no interruption or obstruction to the air flow coming up from the lungs – but they do take on their different sound qualities by very subtle changes in the shape of the vocal tract.

For example – the "ee" sound in mean has the lower and upper jaw quite close together and the tongue is raised towards the roof of the mouth. The "oo" in moon needs to have the back of the tongue raised. When producing the sound "ah" as in darn, the jaws are quite apart and the centre of the tongue is raised.

A diphthong is a long complex vowel sound with starts with one quality and end with another. English has several diphthongs, Italian has none!

Consonants are sounds that need an interruption or obstruction of the air flow. There are three basic classifications – voice, place and manner of articulation.

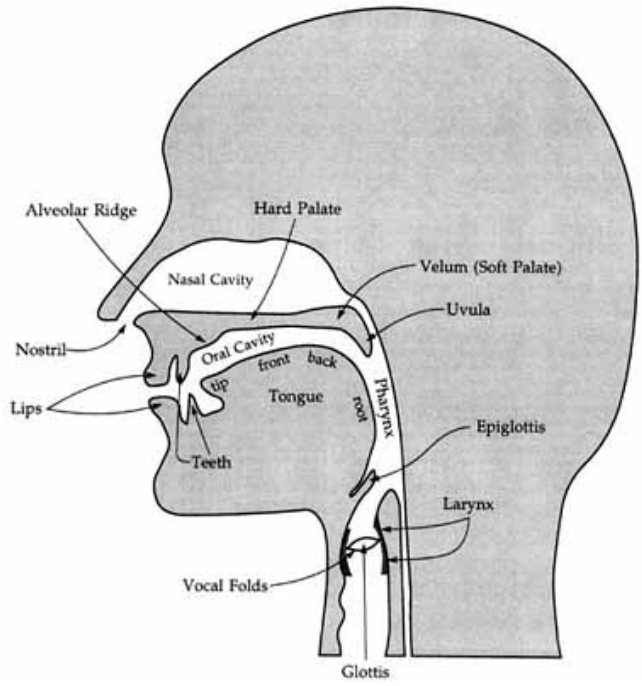
By voice we mean – are the vocal folds vibrating when the sound is produced – the b in bark and p in park are made by briefly closing the lips to stop the air flow, but the b is voiced and the p is not.

The place of articulation is where the air flow is obstructed. The vocal tract extends from the lips down to the glottis. See the figure at the end of this article.

There are a number of differing places of articulation, which are:

Place of Articulation	Word
Labial (lips) pip	Pip
Labial-Dental (lips and teeth)	Fish
Dental (placing the tongue between the teeth)	This
Alveolar (the hard ridge behind the upper teeth)	Ten
Post-Alveolar (between the hard ridge and the hard palate)	Ship
Palatal (hard palate – roof of the mouth)	Yet
Velar (soft palate)	Cat
Glottal (glottis – the vocal folds and the opening between them)	Hen
Manner of Articulation	
Plosive (a complete obstruction followed by release)	Ten
Fricative (very close but not complete obstruction involving friction)	Set
Affricate (very close obstruction where the consonant begins as a *plosive* and ends as a *fricative*)	Church
Nasal (complete obstruction of the mouth but with the velum open)	Man
Approximant (some obstruction but not enough to cause friction) of which there are two types	
Liquids (the tongue touches the alveolar ridge)	Let
Glides (a very slight closure akin to a vowel)	Wet

This diagram shows the positions mentioned in the table:



Vowel Phonemes:					
a	cat				
e	peg	bread			
i	pig	wanted			
o	log	want			
u	plug	love			
ae	pain	day	gate	station	
ee	sweet	heat	thief	these	

ie	tried	light	my	shine	mind
oe	road	blow	bone	cold	
ue	moon	blue	grew	tune	
oo	look	would	put		
ar	cart	fast (regional)			
ur	burn	first	term	heard	work
or	torn	door	warn (regional)		
au	haul	law	call		
er	wooden	circus	sister		
ow	down	shout			
oi	coin	boy			
air	stairs	bear	hare		
ear	fear	beer	here		

Consonant Phonemes:

b	baby			
d	dog			
f	field	photo		
g	game			
h	hat			
j	judge	giant	barge	
k	cook	quick	mix	Chris
l	lamb			
m	monkey	comb		
n	nut	knife	gnat	
p	paper			
r	rabbit	wrong		
s	sun	mouse	city	science
t	tap			

v	van			
w	was			
wh	where (regional)			
y	yes			
z	zebra	please	is	
th	then			
th	thin			
ch	chip	watch		
sh	ship	mission	chef	
zh	treasure			
ng	ring	sink		

Creating Possibilities and Finding Solutions