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A new type of phonetic alphabet and its applications in language teaching: From practical phonetics to morphology

Snejina Sonina*

University of Toronto Scarborough, Centre for French & Linguistics, 1265 Military Trail, Toronto, Ontario, M1C 1A4, Canada

Abstract

This paper introduces a new articulatory alphabet, Artalph, invented by the author using innovative, computer-generated phonetic pictograms to aid in pronunciation and in the explication of language grammar rules and conventions. The essay highlights a variety of practical applications for the new system, from practical phonetics to morphology, and differentiates it from the IPA.

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1. Main text

1. IPA anyone?

In the nineteenth century, the phonetician Henry Sweet, the real-life model behind Henry Higgins in George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* (Allott, 2001, 115–145) created one of the most detailed systems of phonetic signs ever. When the International Phonetic Association was established in 1886, it adopted Sweet's Broad Romic alphabet "with only a few minor modifications" (Singh & Singh, 2006, 26), and it became an excellent tool for studying phonetics and phonology—the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA).

The IPA is a very precise system based on a model phonetic principal: one sign for one sound. I use it whenever I start learning a new language, and I would not have been able to learn English without it. I would also not be able

* Snejina Sonina. Tel.: +1-416-927-9120

E-mail address: sonina@utsc.utoronto.ca

to teach French phonetics and phonology without it. And even this article could not have come into existence without it: as it is customary in linguistic work, I use the IPA signs within this text in square brackets to distinguish them from ordinary letters. To describe the sounds, I will use both the IPA signs and the phonetic terminology found on the International Phonetic Association's website (<http://www.langsci.ucl.ac.uk/ipa/fullchart.html>).

While my use of the IPA will provide firm linguistic grounds to the paper, I will also offer descriptions in simpler terms—descriptions that use pictograms and can be easily understood by any student not familiar with linguistic terminology. My experience of language learning and teaching has taught me that despite its precision, the IPA is rarely used by teachers and never appreciated by students. When I delved into the question of why, I understood that the IPA's unpopularity results from its encoding complexity: to use it efficiently, both students and teachers need to learn a fair number of new alphabetic signs and corresponding linguistic concepts, which can be daunting. So, although a precise linguistic tool exists to help with pronunciation, many teachers either opt for approximations (if similar sounds are known to students) or struggle to find ways to show an unusual articulation (if comparable sounds are not known to students or finer distinctions are required).

Moreover, in many academic programs and in whole areas of linguistic research the IPA is not used at all. Instead, for example, there exist special traditional conventions for transcribing in Latin letters with diacritical signs languages that do not themselves use the Latin alphabet. These conventions are different for each field, and as such they complicate comparative studies and hinder communication among scholars. For example, in Slavic studies the letter "c" transcribes the dental affricate [ts], but in Sanskrit studies the same letter is used for a palatal affricate [tʃ]. The use of diacritics also differs in both fields.

Quite clearly, then, there is a need for an additional phonetic alphabet: one simpler than the IPA yet also one more universal than conventional transcriptions in Latin letters with diacritics. To help students master the IPA and to facilitate my own language studies, I developed a system of pictographic representations that, with the help of computer graphics, have led to a new type of alphabet. I call this system Artalph—to abbreviate the full name, Articulatory Phonetic Alphabet, but also to emphasize the word "art," indicating the system's potential creative use.

In this paper, I will share my experiences in the practical application of this alphabet when teaching language at different levels. The current article seeks to advertise the usefulness of this new type of alphabet for teaching practice, rather than present the system as a whole. I will therefore only explain the features that are necessary to achieve my practical goal—to offer a few concrete and instructive examples from the classroom. A more complete description of the alphabet is available on my forthcoming Artalph webpage (www.artalph.com).

2. What about Artalph?

From a semiotic point of view, Artalph is a system of non-arbitrary signs that depict sounds based on their articulation. The idea of representing sound articulation systematically is, of course, not new. Sweet's alphabet that led to the IPA, for example, was based on the articulatory system of his teacher Alexander Bell—the father of Alexander Graham Bell, who together with Thomas Edison invented the telephone. Bell's system was based on representations of articulatory positions required to produce sounds, but it was so complicated that it proved difficult to use: "It seems inescapable that many of the signs in an iconic alphabet look much too much alike" (Abercrombie, 1990, 100).

The novelty of Artalph consists in its visual representation: neither Bell nor Sweet had computer graphics as creative tools, but nowadays it is possible to produce quite distinguishable iconic signs representing the articulation of human speech. Artalph characters comprise a set of symbols, schematic representations of the

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