3.1: Broad and Narrow Transcription

Learning to use the IPA to transcribe speech can be very challenging, for many reasons. One reason we’ve already talked about is the challenge of ignoring what we know about how a word is spelled to pay attention to how the word is spoken. Another challenge is simply remembering which symbols correspond to which sounds. The tables in Units 2.4 and 3.2 may seem quite daunting, but the more you practice, the better you’ll get at remembering the IPA symbols.

A challenge that many beginner linguists face is deciding exactly how much detail to include in their IPA transcriptions. For example, if you know that Canadian English speakers tend to diphthongize the mid-tense vowels [e] and [o] in words like say and show, should you transcribe them as the diphthongs [eɪ] and [ou]? And the segment [p] in the word apple doesn’t sound quite like the [p] in pear; how should one indicate that? Does the word manager really begin with the same syllable that the word human ends with?

Part of learning to transcribe involves making a decision about exactly how much detail to include in your transcription. If your transcription includes enough information to identify the place and manner of articulation of consonants, the voicing of stops and fricatives, and the tongue and lip position for vowels, this is usually enough information for someone reading your transcription to be able to recognize the words you’ve transcribed. A transcription at this level is called a broad transcription.

But it’s possible to include a great deal more detail in your transcription, to more accurately represent the particulars of accent and dialect and the variations in certain segments. A transcription that includes a lot of phonetic detail is called a narrow transcription. The rest of this chapter discusses the most salient details that would be included in a narrow transcription of the most widespread variety of Canadian English.