

IPA and French Sounds

The International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) is now used in all high quality dictionaries to describe “proper” pronunciation. Previous dictionaries used approximations from “native” sounds, but that approach always failed for those people whose *regional* pronunciation differed from the “standard” used by the dictionary makers. This problem still exists in books that were written with a British audience in mind - they are mostly useless for Americans. The Berlitz phrase books are a particularly clear example of this phenomenon.

Only two important problems arise in using the IPA in a dictionary. The first problem concerns only the dictionary maker: the variation in pronunciation in different regions makes it difficult to choose a single example. We are not going to tackle this problem very directly here, except to make some comments about variation in pronunciation of French words. We will favor Parisian pronunciation since this is very common even if not entirely standard. You will be easily understood if you attempt to imitate the Parisian pronunciation. You will almost surely speak with some trace of an American accent, so the minor differences are not critical. Learning to recognize and imitate regional French accents is too advanced to tackle here, and is not necessary unless you are in the acting profession.

The second problem with the IPA does concern us here. How do you produce the sounds associated with the various symbols? We will suggest how to do this using a combination of French and American words wherever possible. However, not all French sounds occur in American speech (and vice versa). We are only going to cover the symbols needed to decode French pronunciation. I will usually talk about American rather than English, because the suggested words follow “standard” American pronunciation.

Phonemes versus sounds: each symbol in the IPA stands for a particular phoneme. It may be that the phoneme has more than one sound. An example is the ‘r’ sound in French. This is made with the tongue next to the soft palate in the Parisian area (sort of a swallowed r) but with the tongue trilling against the teeth in southern areas of France. Although the sound is different, it is always possible to recognize an r, and so it is represented by a single phoneme and a single symbol.

The Vowels

We will start with the vowel sounds in French - the most difficult area for speakers of American. Work hard on these sounds and you will be well along the road to a mastery of French sounds. One general comment applies to all French vowels - they are not diphthongized like American pronunciation of vowels. When we pronounce a word like *day*, we tend to say *dayee* by prolonging the vowel sound. French never adds this *eee* sound to the end of their vowels. We do this so unconsciously that it is difficult for us to hear the difference. You can do an experiment which will help. Listen to the difference in pronunciation of the two words *eye* and *eyes*. The first of these is diphthongized into *aieee* (like a scream!) but the plural tends to be a much purer sound with only the starting value. (You will probably want to do all these

pronunciation exercises in a quiet room away from other people.)

In all the paragraphs that follow, we will start with the International Phonetic Alphabet symbol in brackets and then follow with examples from American pronunciation and then from French.

The A sounds

[a] This is like the a-sound we would use in the American words *pat*, *cat*, *hat*, *fat*. The same sound occurs in the French words *patte* [pat] , *Jacques* [zak] , *chat* [ʃa] , *chapeau* [ʃapo] , *gras* [gra] . In fact, this sound is gradually taking over the typical **a** phoneme in most French words, above all in the Paris region. However, the Parisian *a* is actually somewhere between this sound and the next symbol. If you pronounce American *shack* and *shock*, you have the extremes. The Parisian *a* is somewhere between these two pronunciations. This sound is always spelled with either *a* or *à*. The accent grave does not change the pronunciation.

[ɑ] This is like the a-sound we would make in the American words *pot*, *caught*, *haughty*, *fought*. An example in French would be *pâte* [pat] . Although you probably would want to preserve the culinary distinction between *patte* and *pâte* (paw and dough/pasta) the sound difference is not very great. As a matter of fact, many French people would not pronounce these words differently and would favor something closer to the pat|cat|fat version of the a.

The E sounds

[e] is not at all like the American *e*, rather it is the *long a* sound in such American words as *fatal*, *natal*, *playback* and so on. It is shorter than the typical *long a* of American speech. In words ending in *long a* such as *day*, we tend to say *day-ee*. That *ee* part is missing in French. This sound is almost always indicated by an acute accent on the *e* in French words: *dé* [de] , *écoute* [ekut] , *fée* [fe] . The *e* in *ess* or *esc* combinations is usually pronounced *é* also. Theoretically you should also pronounce ‘ai’ at the end of a word with this value, but it is not easy to hear and often sounds like next type of *e* [ɛ] instead. Since the first person singular of the future tense (I will xxx) always ends in ai, you will have lots of practice with this problem. For example, je mangerai [ʒə mɑ̃ʒəʁe] , j’irai [ʒ iʁe] , je finirai [ʒə finiʁe] . This sound distinguishes the first person future from the first person conditional, which always ends in *ais* and is always pronounced with [ɛ] : je mangerais [ʒə mɑ̃ʒəʁɛ] , j’irais [ʒ iʁɛ] , je finirais [ʒə finiʁɛ]. No nouns end in ai in French and only rare adjectives do (bai, gai, lai, vrai). Of these, only *gai* has the [ge] sound in the masculine. All the feminine forms and the masculine of the other three have the [ɛ] sound.

[ɛ] is the same sound as in American *fair*, *Mary*, *pear*, *dare*, *swear*. French words with this sound include *père* [pɛʁ] , *mère* [mɛʁ] , *mer* [mɛʁ] , *maire* [mɛʁ] , *mais* [mɛ] , *ajoutais* [aʒute] . The *ai* couplet in French usually has this value. But an *n* following the *ai* causes

nasalization, and an *l* following the *ai* changes the pronunciation to something close to American *eye* -spelled in IPA as [aj]. Examples are American *fly* [flaj], French *ail* [aj], *travail* [travaj].

[ə] is the vowel sound in American *duck*, *puck*, *putt*, *luck*. French examples include *brebis*, *gredin*. This *e* is often called *e sourd*, *e muet* (*caduc*) because it tends to disappear at the end of words and often inside words. It usually is heard when dropping it would make words difficult to pronounce. For example, *une fenêtre* is pronounced [yn fənɛ:tr]¹ because *unef* (ounf) is very hard to say, but *la fenêtre* is pronounced [la fnɛ:tr] because (laf nettr) the *f* can be easily tacked on to the *la*. Many dictionaries will enclose the mute *e* in parentheses to indicate that it can be dropped. In reading poetry, singing songs (or imitating a Marseilles accent), the mute *e* is pronounced whenever it occurs between two consonants internal to the verse, but not at the end of the verse. Here is an example with the *e sourd* underlined, then the phonetic transcription is given.

Comme je descendais des Fleuves impassibles (Rimbaud)
[kɔmə ʒə desɑ:de de flœvɛz ɛmpasibl]

This example is a bit misleading, since that line should have 12 pronounced syllables (it is an alexandrin) and you have to give up one of the syllables. The *e caduc* at the end of *fleuves* is an excellent candidate for dropping, but don't ask me why! OK, it messes up the elision.

The I sounds

[i] is a very simple sound in French. It is equivalent to the *ee* sound in American *fee*, *agree*, *tea*. However it is shorter. We often pronounce the *ee* sound with a slight 'uh' at the end. This is entirely absent in French - only the first 'ee' part is pronounced. French examples are *cri*, *tri*, *micro*, *pie*. French has no short *i* sound like the sound that occurs in American *pit*, *fit*, *mitt*.

We have already mentioned how the IPA spells what in American is a long *i* sound as in *pile*, *rile*, *spice*, *rice*, *stile*. The sound should be short in French, more like the *i* in *rice* than the *i* in *rile*. The French equivalent uses *ail* as the phonetic code (spelling) and the IPA symbols are [aj].

The U sounds

[y] is a difficult sound for Americans. No American words have this sound. You have to learn to make the sound by pursing your lips as though to say 'ooo' and while holding your lips in this position, say 'eee' instead. With a little practice, you can learn to make this sound. It is worth the practice because it is too easy to confuse with the next sound in this category. Although the IPA symbol is a 'y', in French this occurs as a 'u' preceded by a consonant: *fût*, *pu*, *rue*, *absolu*, and also in the past participle of the verb *avoir*: *eu* where the *e* is entirely silent.

¹The colon in IPA means the previous vowel is lengthened in speech. See end of this article for more details.

[u] also is pronounced with the lips pursed, but it is very similar to American *pooh*, *foo*, *glue*, *sue*. In French words, this sound is always spelled ‘ou’: *clou*, *roue*, *trou*.

[ø] is close to the uh sound heard in American *fur*. Try pronouncing this and then dropping the r (it may help to imitate a Boston accent). Typical French words would be *feu* [fø], *nerveux* [nɛrvø]. This sound is very close to the [œ] sound, but the mouth is more closed. In fast conversation, you will probably not hear much difference between the two sounds.

[œ] is similar to American euh sound in *girl*, *furl*. You can learn this sound by beginning to pronounce *furl* but not adding the *rl* part. You will need to hear some real French pronunciation to adjust the sound however. Typical French words would be *peur* [pœr], *leur* [lœr], *choeur* [kœr].

The O sounds

[o] is the long oh sound in American *tote*, *groat*, *soak*. French examples include *rose* [roz], *pose* [poz], *sot* [so].

[ɔ] is the u sound in American *gut*, *slut*, *bun*, *cull*. In French we find examples in *sotte* [sɔt], *bonne* [bɔn], *colle* [kɔl]. A very common American mispronunciation of *bonne* makes it sound like American *bone*. Don’t do that!

The Nasal vowels

This is a difficult group for Americans, because the sounds don’t occur naturally in any American words. The closest we come is when we say ‘huh?’ (sometimes spelled hunh). Practice saying this to yourself (without the h sound at the beginning) and listen to the slight sound that comes through your nose toward the end of the word, a little like an N sound, but not anywhere as strong as a real N. This is the sound you are looking for and will have to practice for the following four French nasal vowels:

[ɛ̃] *brun*, *un* are examples from French. This is the sound that is closest to the American *huh* we were just discussing. This sound is tending to disappear in French pronunciation (especially in Paris and northern France), and the substituted nasal is [ɛ̃] instead. Since *un* is the word for *one* as well as the masculine indefinite article, it is important to get this sound right.

[ɛ̃] is the nasalized *e* sound of French and occurs in an incredible variety of spellings (at least 25!) so it is important to master also. You can learn this by pronouncing American *plan* and dropping the “n” sound while letting the sound resonate through your nose. Now for the French examples which we will write as (spelling group), example, [ipa symbols], translation:

(IN) *vin* [vɛ̃], wine,
(INT) *vint* [vɛ̃], he/she/it came,
(INTH) *plinthe* [plɛ̃t], baseboard,
(ING) *poing* [pɔ̃], fist,
(INGT) *vingt* [vɛ̃], twenty,
(INCT) *instinct* [ɛ̃stɛ̃], instinct,
(IM) *imbu* [ɛ̃by], imbued with,
(EIN) *rein* [rɛ̃], kidney,
(HEIN) *hein* [ɛ̃], what?
(EINT) *ceint* [sɛ̃], it encircles, encircled
(EING) *seing* [sɛ̃], signature (LEGAL)
(AIN) *pain* [pɛ̃], bread,
(AINT) *saint* [sɛ̃], saint,
(AING) *parpaing* [paɾpɛ̃], cinder block,
(AINC) *vainc* [vɛ̃], it conquers
(AIM) *daim* [dɛ̃], buckskin, suede,
(EN) *moyen* [mwajɛ̃], means, way, medium
(ENT) *contient* [kɔ̃tjɛ̃], it contains,
(YM) *thym* [tɛ̃], thyme,
(YN) *synthèse* [sɛ̃tɛz], synthesis

(HUN) *hun* [ɛ̃], Hun,
(EUNG) *Meung-sur-Loire* [mɛ̃ syR lwaR], a place name,
(UN) *un* [ɛ̃], one, an
(EUN) *jeun* [ʒɛ̃], fasting,
(UM) *parfum* [paɾfɛ̃], perfume

NOTE: the last five spellings are pronounced as shown in northern France, but they are still given the “standard” pronunciation in dictionaries, where the [ɛ̃] will be spelled with [œ̃].

[ã] can be approximated in American by nasalizing the n in *fawn*. Examples in French are *faon* [fã], *blanc* [blã], *plan* [plã]. Notice that the spelling can be *aon* as well as *an*.

[õ] is a nasalized *o* sound. You can start with American *bone* and change the hard n into a nasal one. This should approximate the French *bon* [bõ]. Or you could listen to Eartha Kitt!

All the nasal sounds occur in the phrase *un bon vin blanc*, which you can use for practice (the phrase, not the wine).

The Consonants

We now come to a much easier problem, spelling the consonants in French. For this section we will work our way loosely through the alphabet, skipping the vowels.

B sounds

[b] as in American *bear* is essentially the same as the French b: *beurre, bon, brebis*. Note that in French *bombe*, both b's are pronounced. And the spelling is always with a b.

ESS sounds

[s] is the s sound in American *sassy*. In French this is always the sound when a cedilla (çÇ) is used in the spelling. It is also the sound when either e or i follow a c (*cela, cinéma*). It is also used for an s beginning a word or when the s is doubled. Let's look at some examples of these uses.

Ceci, ça, délice, face, selon, fosse, poisson. This last word should motivate your correct pronunciation. **Poisson** has the s sound whereas **poison** has a z sound in the middle. You would definitely want to order the right one in a restaurant!

SH sounds

[ʃ] is like the American sound in show, fish, shall. French examples include chuintier [ʃwãte], cache [kaʃ]. Although this sound is always spelled with CH in French, sometimes the CH spelling is pronounced as a K sound. Such words are usually of Greek origin (psychiatre, archange) but you really just have to learn the proper pronunciation. In American (and other languages) we have another pronunciation for ch, as in *catch*. This is not a normal sound in French; it occurs only in foreign words (Tchaïkovski, Tchèque) where it is preceded by a T.

D sounds

[d] is very close to the American d in *dog*, but the tongue pushes a little harder against the teeth when the d is used in French. French examples: *drap* [dʁa], *dehors* [dəɔʁ], *du* [dy], *des* [de].

F sounds

[f] is identical to American f in *father*. French examples include *forêt* [fɔʁɛ], *feu* [fø], *folle* [fɔl].

G sounds

[g] is like the American g in *agog*. There are multiple spellings in French: *gare*, *guerre*, *gourou*, *digue*. Note that *ige* [iʒ] has a different sound - to keep the g hard, you must add the u to make *igue*. (Also, the American g usually has two sounds as in *garage*. The second sound does not occur normally in French. For foreign words with this sound, they use *dj* to fake the sound: *Djinn*[dʒin] (= genie).

H usage

[h] is not a French sound, but that doesn't keep it from being complicated. H is used in spelling many words. That is not too bad, but some of the Hs are just silent and a kind of reminder of the Latin origin of the word. When they are preceded by a consonant, elision occurs; when preceded by an article, ellipsis occurs. So for example we have *l'héroïne* [l'ɛʁoin] and with a multiplicity of heroines we would use *les héroïnes*[lez'ɛʁoin] and turn the s in *les* into a z sound. This is the normal case and is called a *non-aspirated* H. The abnormal case is called an *aspirated* H and blocks both ellision and ellipsis. It turns out that a masculine hero has this kind of H, so we have *le héros*[lə'ɛʁo] and *les héros* [le'ɛʁo] with the s remaining silent in *les*. You just have to memorize all this, but don't take it too seriously, because the French have a terrible time with this themselves! Just remember when you are in Paris, you will visit *Les Halles* [le al] and eat *des haricots verts* [de ariko vɛʁ]. Most of the cases of aspirated H are derived from German, but that may not help much!

J sounds

[ʒ] is the zh sound in American *pleasure*, *azure*. French has two spellings for this sound. The simpler is the use of J as in *Jean-Jacques*. The messier one is with G. Whenever g is followed by an e, you use this sound: *geai* [ʒe], *gérant* [ʒɛʁã], *jugé* [ʒyʒ].

K sounds

[k] is the same as the k sound in American *khaki*, *flak*. Like English, French has multiple spellings for the k sound: *kif-kif* [kifkif], *pique* [pik], *calin* [kalɛ̃], *cou* [ku]. The rules are virtually the same as in English, c before a, o, u is pronounced k. Very few French words use the letter K.

L sounds

[l] is similar to American l in *gull*, *fill*, *lark*. But the tongue is a bit further forward in French (they don't swallow their l as much as we do). The difference is very subtle and you probably should not worry about it. French examples are *bal*, *folle*, *ville*. The spelling is usually straightforward, although sometimes a double ll in French takes on a y sound (see below).

M sounds

[m] is like American mom. French always spells this sound with m although nasalized Ms have a different sound. Examples: mère, môme, mener, monnaie.

N sounds

[n] is like American new, nother. French examples: neuf, nonne. The doubled up n is always pronounced this way (not nasalized). Single n following a consonant is usually nasalized.

[ŋ] is like American ing in *smoking, parking*. This is not a normal sound in French and occurs only in borrowed words like *smoking, parking*. Sometimes the borrowing gets fuzzy: *shampooing* in French is not pronounced as in English, but rather as [ʃãpwẽ] .

[ɲ] is not a common sound in American. It is closest to the taunting *nya-nya* of children. French examples are *agneau, digne*. It is always spelled gn.

P sounds

[p] is similar to American p in *spit, sputter* but different from the American p in *pit* or *putter*. You probably don't hear much difference when you pronounce these words, but you can learn the difference quite easily. Hold a small piece of paper in front of your mouth and watch as you say *spit* and then *pit*. You should find that the paper moves with *pit*, but not with *spit*. Americans put a puff of air with their Ps when starting a word. The French don't do this. The difference is not critical for French (although it is for some other languages). But you can learn the French pronunciation using the slip of paper. Practice on French *point, père, papier*.

[ʀ] is not very close to the American r in *fur, ready*. The pronunciation varies even in France. In the south it is trilled more like a Spanish r, but in the north (and Paris) it is produced with the tongue against the soft palate. You really need a guide to help you with this one. You can practice with French *réfrigérateur* [REFRIZERATœR] , *boire* [bwaR] , *pair* [paR] . Good luck! Also you might find an alternate IPA symbol in some dictionaries: [r]. For our purposes here, they are the same.

T sounds

[t] is closer to the British T than the American T in *water, tea*. As with D, the French push the tongue harder against the teeth when pronouncing this consonant. Practice with French *trente* [trãt]. Don't swallow the last T, make it very clear.

V sounds

[v] is no different from American V in *valve, vector*. French occasionally spells this with a w when using words borrowed from German. Examples: *va* [va], *vont* [võ], *wagon* [vagõ]. (Note: W is not a common letter in French, all the words are borrowed from other languages and usually pronounced as we would. A good example is *Walkman*.)

W sounds

[w] is pronounced as in American *water, willow*. As noted above, foreign words with W are usually pronounced as we would (*wagon* is the exception) but the sound is usually spelled in French with OU followed by a vowel: *oui* [wi], *ouate* [wat] or by OI preceded by a consonant: *moi* [mwa], *toi* [twa].

[ʏ] is not found in American although you could start with wheat and try to round your lips for the ooo sound while saying the eee part of *wheat*. This will get you close to the French *huit* [ʏt].

Y sounds

[j] is the Y sound in American *yellow*. In French, this is usually found as Y plus a vowel: *yeux, yaourt, yoga*. Sometimes it is spelled LL as in *fille* [fij], *famille* [famijə].

Z sounds

[z] is like the American Z in *zoo, zebra, pose*. French uses Z for the spelling, but also s surrounded by vowels takes on this value: *poison* [pɥwazõ], *rose* [Roz], *pose* [poz], *zoo* [zo]. Of course, that also happens with ellision: *Les Alpes* [lez alp]

Length of Sounds

Some sounds in French may be lengthened. IPA symbols show this lengthening by adding a colon after the lengthened vowel. We have already shown an example without talking about it.

The word *fenêtre* has the IPA spelling: [fənɛ:tr]. Notice that the second e has a circumflex accent. This always indicates that the older French spelling had an s following the vowel (fenestre was the old spelling). The s gradually dropped out of pronunciation but the vowel was lengthened to compensate for it. In Parisian French, even this distinction is disappearing, but it is still shown in some dictionaries and is emphasized in some regional speech. You will see this with all the circumflex vowels if the dictionary shows lengthening, but many dictionaries don't bother at all with lengthening.

A few traps

Most of the French words that begin with imm or inn pronounce the 'I' as [i] not [ɛ̃]. The only exception is the word immangeable (inedible) where the nasal version is preserved. That is also the case for in or im when the n or m is not doubled.

It has been pointed out earlier that ess usually is pronounced as though éss. When it ends a word like doctoresse, it sounds like the accent grave è. So words like dessus and dessous should have the accent aigu pronunciation.