

# An Introduction to French Pronunciation

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Revised Edition

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**Glanville Price**

 **Blackwell**  
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# Preface

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Advantage has been taken of this second edition of a book first published in 1991 to make a few minor corrections and to introduce a small number of other changes, particularly by way of updating the bibliographical references. But in its essentials it remains the same book and the pagination of the original edition has been retained.

I am grateful to those colleagues who have written to me or to the publishers to plead for a reprint or to make constructive suggestions. My especial thanks go to Dr Mari C. Jones of the University of Cambridge for her invaluable advice and assistance in the preparation of this edition.

G. P.

# 1 General Considerations

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## 1.1 Introduction

1.1.1 Pronunciation, by definition, is to do with a language in its spoken form, i.e. with sounds. A printed book expresses whatever it has to say, even about pronunciation, through the very different medium of the written language. So, right at the outset of a book such as this we have a problem – or, rather, a number of interrelated problems. In particular, we have to ask and, one hopes, answer the questions: what justification is there for even attempting to discuss the spoken medium through the written medium? and, secondly, supposing such justification can be demonstrated, how do we set about doing it? In the following paragraphs we shall try to answer these questions – though to some extent indirectly rather than directly.

The first thing to be made clear is that this is not a book for absolute beginners. It is a book for those who already have at least a basic knowledge of how French is pronounced but who need help and advice with a view to improving their pronunciation, to making it more authentic, to eliminating serious errors, and to reducing to an acceptable minimum features of their pronunciation that would betray them as non-native-speakers.

The use of the expression ‘reducing to an acceptable minimum’ in the previous paragraph is deliberate. To be

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realistic, one must accept that very few foreign learners of a language, even those who are linguistically gifted and who have lived for years in a country where the language in question is spoken, achieve such a degree of perfection in their pronunciation that they can pass themselves off unflinchingly as native-speakers.

A more realistic ambition is to be able to pronounce the language well enough to speak confidently without feeling self-conscious about such traces of a foreign accent as will in most cases remain. A great deal of guidance can in fact be given that ought to ensure that most of the errors that so often betray one as a foreigner are avoided. That is the aim of this book.

That said, it has to be recognized that no book can, by itself, go more than a certain distance – though nevertheless a considerable distance – towards giving one ‘a good accent’. To achieve the best accent one is capable of means, of course, hearing and listening to the language as it is spoken by native-speakers (and, as we shall see, there is a significant difference in the language-learning process between merely hearing the language and actually listening to it in an informed way). Ideally, this means talking ‘live’ to native-speakers. If for any reason that is not possible a great deal can be learned by listening to radio or television broadcasts which are now becoming widely available through the medium of satellite TV (though, as we shall see in 9.7.2, there are aspects of ‘media French’ that are not to be imitated in ordinary conversation) or by using one of the many taped courses that are on the market.

There are no tapes or cassettes to go with this book. The intention is not to provide yet more listening material but to help the reader to listen *in an informed way* to whatever sources of spoken French are available and so to derive the maximum benefit from them.

Having said earlier that no book can go more than a certain distance towards giving one a good accent, we must now stress that the same is true, if less obviously so, of spoken

material. If recordings or the services of native-speakers are to be used to the best advantage, they must be supplemented by a systematic analysis of the phonetic structure, or sound-system, of the target language (i.e. the language that is being studied). This analysis will be all the more helpful if it is, at least to some extent, contrastive, i.e. if it draws attention to differences between the target language and the learner's own language. Unless they are gifted with exceptionally well-developed powers of mimicry, learners will almost certainly not be able to imitate as well as they otherwise might even a native-speaker who is physically present, much less so a disembodied recorded voice. They need to know what to listen for, what it is they are trying to imitate. Otherwise they may not even realize that what they are saying is by no means a close, let alone a perfect, imitation of what they hear. That is what this book is about. (To take a very simple example: how many English-speaking learners of French are aware that the *t* of English *too* differs in at least two important respects from the initial *t* of French *tout*? See 14.3.1 and 14.4.2.)

1.1.2 One further problem that has to be taken into account is that not all French-speakers pronounce their language in the same way. As with English or indeed any other widely spoken language, regional differences exist. There is considerable variation in pronunciation between one part of France and another, and even more so between one part of the wider French-speaking world and another. There are also differences arising out of such factors as age, educational background and social attitudes (e.g. snobbery or inverted snobbery, conformism or anti-conformism). And the pronunciation of one and the same individual may vary, and sometimes quite markedly so, depending on such factors as the formality or informality of the occasion and the speed of utterance.

The kind of pronunciation described in this book is basically the kind that educated Parisians might normally use in everyday conversation. This is not in any absolute sense 'better' than any other kind of French pronunciation but as it

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is the basis of French as taught in schools, colleges and universities all over the world it would be perverse not to adopt it here too. However, where there seems good cause to do so, we shall draw attention to regional, social or stylistic differences in pronunciation.

1.1.3 Just as it is impossible within one short book to describe all types of French pronunciation, or even all major varieties, so it is impossible for us, in making contrastive comments, to take account of all possible varieties of English pronunciation. Our comments on English pronunciation are therefore not necessarily applicable to all native-speakers of English. Generally speaking, the standard of comparison is what is usually known as ‘Received Pronunciation’ (by whom it is ‘received’ is not entirely clear . . .) or ‘RP’ – perhaps most easily, if somewhat vaguely, defined as the pronunciation of speakers on British radio and television who are not perceived as having any particular regional accent. This is not the pronunciation of most English-speakers and, to repeat the point just made in relation to French, it is not in any absolute sense ‘better’ than other varieties of English. But it *is* a widely recognized standard – it is, if nothing else, a useful point of reference for characterizing other types of pronunciation. We shall, however, occasionally take account of features of pronunciation that are current in other types of British English or in American English.

1.1.4 A more specific problem arises out of the fact that the ordinary spelling of French – like that of English – is at best an inadequate and imperfect way of representing the pronunciation of the language. We need a more efficient system and the one we shall adopt is that of the International Phonetic Association, the IPA – the abbreviation can also stand for International Phonetic Alphabet. Other systems are available and are often found in particular in various works on the history of the French language. But the IPA system is by far the most widely used and is the one employed in many

standard works of reference, including two-way dictionaries of French and English such as *Harrap's New Standard French and English Dictionary*, the *Collins–Robert French Dictionary*, the *Oxford–Hachette French Dictionary* and the Larousse *Grand dictionnaire français–anglais anglais–français*.

The IPA symbols used in this book and the sounds they represent are listed in 1.7 below and are discussed in some detail later (4.7–4.12, 5.1 and 6.6–6.11, and in the sections on each vowel, semi-consonant and consonant). At this stage it is enough to note that the principle on which the system is based is that, in a given language, a given sound is always represented by the same symbol and a given symbol always represents the same sound. This remark, however, calls for two comments:

(i) The word ‘sound’ as used above is imprecise – strictly speaking, we should use the term ‘phoneme’, which is discussed in 1.2 below.

(ii) The expression ‘in a given language’ is important; for example, French *troupe* and English *troop* can both be represented in the IPA as /trup/, but the pronunciation of the vowel and of each of the three consonants is in reality noticeably different in the two languages.

## 1.2 Sounds, Phonemes and Allophones

1.2.1 In print, the three letters *c*, *a* and *n* making up the word *can* are discrete units, i.e. they are quite clearly separate from one another. It is essential to grasp the idea that *this is not true of speech*. Spoken language – and this is true of all languages – does not consist of a succession of discrete units. Speech is a continuum, a process in which the speech organs (the tongue, the lips, the velum, etc. – see 2.3 to 2.5 below) are constantly moving from one position to another. This means that the pronunciation of a given ‘sound’ may be affected by that of preceding sounds and, even more so, by that of following sounds.

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If it seems odd that the pronunciation of one sound can be conditioned by that of a following sound, i.e. by that of a sound that has not yet been uttered, one only has to realize that, when we speak, we not only know what we are about to say but are also *anticipating* what we are about to say; consequently, the quality of any sound we utter may well be affected by the fact that we are at the same time preparing to utter a later sound. (For more on this, see chapter 18, ‘Consonantal Assimilation’.)

A simple example ought to help to make this clear. Most speakers of English would assume that in words such as *keel* and *cool* the first consonant (and whether it is written as *k* or *c* is irrelevant) is the same – the IPA would represent it as /k/. But in reality, in most people’s English, the /k/ of *keel* and the /k/ of *cool* differ in at least two respects. One of these is very obvious: when we start to say *keel*, the lips are spread, i.e. they take up (or are beginning to take up – it varies from speaker to speaker) the position required for the following *ee*; but, for many though not all speakers of English, when they start to say *cool*, i.e. even before they utter the /k/, the lips are to some extent rounded, i.e. they have already taken up (or are beginning to take up) the position required for the following *oo*: the lip position required for the vowel is taken up before the /k/ is uttered and, to that extent, we can say that the pronunciation of the /k/ is influenced by the fact that the speaker is anticipating the following vowel. (In French, this spreading or rounding of the lips in words such as *qui* or *coup* is even more marked.) But that is not all. The *ee* of *keel* is a front vowel, i.e. it is pronounced by raising the front of the tongue, while the *oo* of *cool* is a back vowel, i.e. it is pronounced by raising the back of the tongue. The consequence of this is that, when the tongue makes contact with the roof of the mouth, as it must when we pronounce the sound /k/, it does so further forward in the mouth for *keel* than for *cool*. This is less obvious than the anticipation of the lip-position of the vowel but it has an even greater effect on the quality of the consonant, as can easily be checked by asking somebody

to pronounce the words *keel* and *cool* but to stop once they have pronounced the initial consonant – the difference is quite noticeable.

Similarly, in English as spoken in the south of England, there is a clearly audible distinction between the way /l/ is pronounced before a vowel as in *leaf*, *like*, *loose* (the so-called ‘clear l’) and the way it is pronounced after a vowel as in *feel*, *mile*, *cool* or in words such as *little*, *people*, *tackle* (the so-called ‘dark l’). (For more on this, see 16.2 below.)

1.2.2 These distinctions between different varieties of /k/ or between different varieties of /l/ are certainly real enough, but they are of a very different order from the distinction between, say, *t* and *d*. The difference is that it is not possible in English (though it may be in other languages) to use the distinction between clear and dark *l* or between the /k/ of *keel* and the /k/ of *cool* to make meaningful distinctions, whereas this *is* possible with *t* and *d*. We have, for example, such pairs as *ten* and *den* or (in British but not necessarily in American English) *writer* and *rider*, in each of which the distinction of meaning depends solely on the distinction between *t* and *d*. Whatever the spelling may be, in pronunciation the two members of each pair are identical in other respects. But if, for the sake of argument, we were to suppose that the /k/ of *keel* was always written as a *k* and the /k/ of *cool* as a *c*, it would still be impossible in English to have a pair of words *kool* and *cool*, since the /k/ of *keel* cannot occur in English before the vowel of *cool*. In other words, the distinction between these two /k/ sounds does not have the same importance in English as that between *t* and *d*, since it depends solely upon the ‘phonetic context’, i.e. upon the sounds that precede or follow, and cannot be used to make meaningful distinctions. The same is true of clear and dark *l*.

Such variations in the pronunciation of what is basically the same ‘sound’ (to continue to use for the moment a term that is not strictly appropriate) occur in all languages, though the man or woman in the street is not generally aware of them.

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1.2.3 It should now be clear why the term ‘sound’ is inadequate. The *t* of *ten* and the *d* of *den* are different sounds – but so are the /k/ of *keel* and the /k/ of *cool*. But whereas in the first case the difference enables us to make meaningful distinctions, in the second it serves no such purpose. We can therefore distinguish, within a given language, between what we might call *distinctive* or *functional* ‘sounds’ and *non-distinctive* or *non-functional* ‘sounds’. The technical term for a distinctive or functional ‘sound’ is a **phoneme**, and the non-distinctive or non-functional varieties of each phoneme are known as **allophones**. So, in English, the phoneme /k/ has at least two allophones (in reality, there are many more), namely those of *keel* and of *cool*. Likewise, clear *l* and dark *l* are allophones of the same /l/ phoneme.

1.2.4 The number of allophones in any given language probably runs into hundreds, even within the speech of one person. The number of phonemes, however, is comparatively small. It is not possible to give a precise figure for the number of phonemes in French since the number will vary slightly depending (i) on whether or not certain sounds are counted as phonemes or as allophones of the same phoneme (see 4.9.5, 5.1.2 and 10.7.2 below), and (ii) on whose French the count is based on, since some speakers make distinctions that others do not (see 10.9.1 and 10.10.3 below). But it is probably true to say that most native-speakers of French have a repertoire of from thirty-one to thirty-four phonemes. English has rather more – A. C. Gimson, for example (2001: 43 and 91), recognizes forty-four (twenty-four consonants and twenty vowels). Spanish, on the other hand, has as few as twenty-two or twenty-three phonemes, and some languages have even fewer.

1.2.5 As far as the ‘sounds’ of French are concerned, our task is twofold. We have first of all to identify and classify the phonemes of the language, and then to identify and describe the principal allophones of each phoneme.

Transcriptions normally take account only of phonemic differences and are given between oblique strokes, e.g. *siècle* /sjɛkl/, but when attention is specifically drawn to allophonic features such as, for example, the voiceless *l* of *siècle* (see 16.5.1), brackets are used [sjɛk<sup>h</sup>l̥].

### 1.3 Suprasegmental Features

In addition to dividing up an utterance into its phonemes (or, more precisely, into the particular allophones representing the phonemes in the utterance in question), we also have to take account of what are known as ‘suprasegmental features’, i.e. features of pronunciation that relate not just to one allophone but to sequences of allophones. In particular, we have to show (i) which syllables are subject to a particular stress, and (ii) what the basic intonation patterns of French are. These topics are discussed in chapters 9 and 20.

### 1.4 The Articulation of French

One point that must constantly be borne in mind until it becomes second nature when speaking French is that very much greater muscular effort goes into the pronunciation of French than into that of English and that, consequently, French is pronounced with much greater tension than English. It has even been claimed more than once (see for example Carton, 1974: 42) that no other language is pronounced with comparable muscular energy and tension. However that may be in general, it is certainly true that not only English but such languages as German, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, Russian and Welsh are pronounced with less muscular effort and tension than French. English, however, with its very relaxed pronunciation, is perhaps at the other extreme from French and it is particularly important that English-speakers should change their articulatory habits when speaking French. The

effect of this tension is particularly noticeable in so far as it affects the lips, in which it can be seen that both the spreading and the rounding of the lips – for the vowels of *lit* and *loup* respectively, for instance – are much more pronounced than in the case of English.

## 1.5 The Organization of this Book

One problem that is faced by anyone writing a book of this kind is that of finding the most satisfactory – or, rather, the least unsatisfactory – way of organizing the material. One has to divide the material up on some basis or other and there is much to be said for, and little to be said against, starting by making the traditional and phonetically defensible distinction between vowels and consonants (while recognizing that in many languages, French being one of them, the distinction is not absolutely clear cut: see chapters 5 and 13 on the semi-consonants).

But, as we have seen (1.2.1), human speech does not consist, like letters on the printed page, of a mere succession of discrete units. Speech is a process, not a state, and the speech organs are constantly in motion, not only moving from the position they occupied for the production of an earlier sound but preparing to produce sounds that the speaker knows, if only half-consciously, that he or she is going to be uttering later in the same word or in a succeeding word. To take a couple of simple examples:

(i) The *k* sounds of words such as *keen*, *cat* and *cool* are all slightly different because of the fact that, in each case, the position of the lips and the tongue is to some extent anticipating that needed for the production of the following vowel.

(ii) The vowel of *can* is different from that of *cat* because, when we utter the vowel of the word *can*, we are already preparing to utter the following nasal consonant, *n*, and consequently some air escapes through the nose and the vowel is therefore slightly nasalized.