

# AN INTUITIVE SYSTEM FOR TRANSCRIBING THE SURFACE CONTRASTS OF AMERICAN ENGLISH

The transcription system presented here derives primarily from the work of Professor Fred W. Householder of Indiana University.<sup>1</sup> Credit is given in the development of this system to the author of Householder's grandfather's reader (Edwards 1867), who revealed great insight into English stress and intonation contours, and to Chomsky, Halle, and Lukoff (1956), Sleator (1957), and Bolinger (1957).

At mid-century there were two competing phonemicizations of American English. One was referred to as the Pike-Fries system, growing out of the work of two professors at the University of Michigan, and the other was the Smith-Trager system, based on the work of two linguists at the Foreign Service Institute of the Department of State. The latter posited nine simple vowels that combined with a following *y*, *w*, or *h* for a total of 36 potential vowel contrasts, and used four degrees of stress, four degrees of pitch, and four junctures that together theoretically made possible hundreds of intonational contours for English sentences. Householder's system reacted primarily to this latter system by noting that only about a dozen of these actually occur (as the author of his grandfather's reader had known almost 100 years earlier).

Householder's system did not replace either of the earlier two, although certain features of it survive in the system presented in O'Grady et al. Instead, all three were eclipsed for a decade or two in the interest of many scholars by a quite different "deep" analysis set forth in Chomsky & Halle 1968. Our purposes in this course are quite superficial by comparison. We want a system that reflects the surface contrasts of the language (such as rhythm and rhyme) in a way that agrees with our intuitive feel for our everyday speech habits. We want it to be no more complicated than the language actually is in this regard. The test will be in how well it seems to fit.

**MAIN FEATURES.** There are five main distinguishing features to the Householder system: 1. Reduction of all prosodic elements to two phrase-closers, three internal junctures, two tone accents, and one emphasis phoneme. Only the internal junctures need concern us in this course, for their occasional use in transcribing isolated words. (The other features are needed for transcribing longer stretches.) The three internal junctures are (as defined in Householder 1957):

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1. Visiting professor at the University of Hawai'i 1965–66 and Summer 1977.

**Space**, whose features include:

- a. final-like allophones precede; initial-like follow,
- b. significant rhythm-break—relatively greater time interval between last preceding full vowel and next one
- c. next full vowel bears at least secondary stress;

**Hyphen**, with the following characteristics:

- a. final-like allophones precede; initial-like follow,
- b. little or no rhythm-break
- c. next full vowel bears at least secondary stress
- d. preceding vowels are one notch weaker than they would be before space, and an immediately preceding tense vowel is usually two degrees weaker;

**Apostrophe**, a phoneme that structures more like a consonant than a juncture, and

- a. conditions syllable boundary, with final-like allophones before and initial-like after,
- b. causes no rhythm-break at all, allows same fast transition and in tensivity drop that would be present without it
- c. includes glottal catch before stressable vowels and glottal checking of stops among its allophonic effects.

2. The elimination of specific stress markings from the transcription (stress being made predictable from the three junctures).

3. The distinction between two major subsystems of vowels and other syllabic elements: **full** (stressed) and **weak** (unstressed). The full system includes twelve vowels and three diphthongs. The twelve vowels further subdivide into six lax (and checked) vowels, and six tense (and free) vowels. Checked vowels never occur finally in a syllable or word; the syllable is “checked” or closed by some other sound, usually a consonant. Free vowels have a less restricted distribution pattern and are free to occur syllable-finally (as well as everywhere the checked vowels can).<sup>2</sup>

### FULL (STRESSED) SYLLABICS

Lax vowels (checked):

	FRONT		BACK	
HIGH	/i/	<i>lick</i>	/u/	<i>look</i>
MID	/ɛ/	<i>let</i>	/ʌ/	<i>luck</i>
LOW	/æ/	<i>lack</i>	/ɑ/	<i>lock</i>

2. This distinction continues a long tradition, summarized by Kurath 1964, which presents a historically-based analysis of the English vowels in terms of two subsystems—checked and free—that agree item-for-item with that presented here. It also agrees in keeping unstressed schwa in a third and separate weak system.

3. Householder gives *yacht*, *starry*, *Kahn* as additional examples of tense /a/ in his Vermont dialect, as opposed to *hot*, *sorry*, *on* for the lax /a/.

Tense vowels (free):

	FRONT		BACK	
HIGH	/i/	<i>Lee, leak</i>	/u/	<i>Lou, Luke</i>
MID	/e/	<i>lay, lake</i>	/o/	<i>low, cloak</i>
LOW	/a/	<i>la<sup>3</sup></i>	/ɔ/	<i>law, log</i>

True diphthongs (free):

/ay/	<i>lie, like</i>
/aw/	<i>now, loud</i>
/ɔy/	<i>Roy, Lloyd</i>
/yu/	<i>few, feud</i>

4. The inclusion of allophones of the liquids, nasals, and glides together with unstressed vowels in the weak system. With respect to the glides, this has the effect of identifying the final sounds of *city* and *virtue* with the initials of *yes* and *west*, respectively.

### WEAK (UNSTRESSED) SYLLABICS

Unstressed vowels and syllabic glides:

	FRONT	CENTRAL	BACK
HIGH	/y/ <i>city</i> [j]	/ɪ/ <i>roses</i>	/w/ <i>value</i> [ɹ]
MID		/ə/ <i>Rosa's</i>	<i>fellow</i> [ŋ] <sup>4</sup>
LOW			

Syllabic liquids and nasals:

/l/	<i>bottle, personal</i>
/r/	<i>butter, pattern</i>
/m/	<i>bottom, platinum</i>
/n/	<i>button, person</i>

5. The possibility of a different sort of syllable in addition to the traditional syllable, one determined by stressed syllabics. With reference to these stressed syllables, *spasm* would be a one-syllable word, and *operator* would be a two-syllable word, and so forth.

On the next page are a few examples of transcribed words taken from *Householder 1957*, most of which come from the literature of problematic words for any transcription system. See if you can read them.<sup>5</sup> The consonants are given in the listing at the top of the next page.

4. These two allophones of syllabic /w/ depend on whether or not a palatal sound precedes: *value* /vælyw/ has palatal /y/ preceding, while *fellow* /felw/ has /l/ (not a palatal) preceding. Without the palatal preceding, its sound is more “o-ish.”

5. Note for example four different pronunciations of *Plato*.

## NONSYLLABIC CONSONANTS

	LABIAL	DENTAL	ALVEOLAR	PALATAL	VELAR /GLOTTAL
STOPS	/p/ <i>pew</i> /b/ <i>boo</i>		/t/ <i>too</i> /d/ <i>due</i>	/ç/ <i>chew</i> /j/ <i>Jew</i>	/k/ <i>coo</i> /g/ <i>goo</i>
FRICATIVES	/f/ <i>few</i> /v/ <i>view</i>	/θ/ <i>thin</i> /ð/ <i>then</i>	/s/ <i>sue</i> /z/ <i>zoo</i>	/ʃ/ <i>shoe</i> /ʒ/ <i>usual</i>	/h/ <i>who</i>
NASALS	/m/ <i>mew</i>		/n/ <i>new</i>		/ŋ/ <i>sing</i>
LIQUIDS			/l/ <i>Lew</i>	/r/ <i>rue</i>	
GLIDES				/y/ <i>you</i>	/w/ <i>woo</i>

## EXAMPLES

pəçʉətəry	ribet	ekspløyte-ti	næs-taršm
pətišn	ri bet	ələk-trisəty	tændm
du-rešn	refyəji	mis-prənansy' ešn	əltrnet
~ dərešn	efəjy	ənty disəstəblišmn-	əltrnit
əbav	pleto	təryənizm	əl-tarnətiv
o-be ~ əbe	~ ple'to	lagə-riðmik	blækbard
əb-strəkt	~ pletto	winšilwaypr	~ blæk bard
ək-tobr	~ ple to	left-hændidnis	pəs-tel
mələkyəl	ap'rət	ekspløy-tešn	nayt'ret
~ mələkylr	ap'rət	əŋ-zayəty	naytret
ələfn-tayəsis	bøykət-i	ənə-rifikə-bilityu-dinity	laythaws kivr
pr-əmbyələtr	in-kəlket	divinity	layt hawskivr
kəŋkvrityz	ənaysmən	ə-takrəsy	layt-hawskivr

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