Brief Introduction to Phonetics
AKA: Better Heralding Through Linguistics
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Phonetics is a branch of linguistics that studies the sounds of speech. While this is divided into several areas, the most relevant one for SCA heraldry is that of articulatory phonetics. Articulatory phonetics focuses on how sounds are produced by speakers. That is, what is happening in the speaker's mouth to produce the sounds that make up language.[1]

In phonetics, sounds are divided into two main categories: consonants and vowels. Consonants are sounds produced by totally or partially blocking the flow of air (usually flowing out from the lungs but sometimes flowing in), while vowels are sounds produced by manipulating an unblocked flow of air.

Consonant sounds are differentiated from each other in three key ways: place, manner, and voice. The place of articulation refers to where in the vocal tract the airflow is obstructed. For example, an alveolar sound is one where the airflow is obstructed using the tip of the tongue and the ridge just behind the upper teeth. The manner of articulation refers to how the obstruction takes place. For example, a plosive sound is one where the airflow is totally blocked for a moment and then released. Voice refers to whether or not the vocal cords vibrate when a sound is produced.

Vowel sounds are differentiated from each other by height, frontness, and roundness.[2] Height and frontness both refer to the position of the tongue in the mouth, so a close front vowel would be one where the tongue is close to the roof of the mouth in the front. Roundness refers to whether the lips are rounded or not.

The International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) applies these insights in creating a written representation of spoken languages. Unlike written languages in general, the IPA endeavors to represent the sounds as spoken. For example, modern English has been noted to have many idiosyncrasies in its orthography (the way words are represented in writing), so that the words "cough" and "though" are pronounced very differently

[1] Articulatory phonetics also concerns the production of sign elements in signed languages, though I do not know enough about the phonetics of signed languages to incorporate them here.
[2] Technically speaking, vowels are actually differentiated based on the key formant frequencies they generate, but the classic tongue positioning and roundness paradigm works well for our purposes.

despite being written similarly.[3] In an IPA transcription of my speech, these words would appear as /kɔf/ and /ðo/.

While it is possible for native speakers of English to associate specific pronunciations with the orthographic representation of "cough," these pronunciations may vary due to dialectal differences. That is, due to the sound changes of some dialects of English, a speaker might interpret "cough" as indicating a pronunciation of /kɒf/ rather than /kɔf/. This phenomenon is known as the "cot-caught merger." A similar dialectal difference concerns the pronunciation of the vowel in words like "ride" and "tide," which in General American English is pronounced [aɪ] and in Southern American English is pronounced [aː]. This phenomenon is part of the Southern Vowel Shift, which is moving Southern English pronunciation away from that represented by General American English orthography. The IPA thus presents a less ambiguous method of recording pronunciations.

Familiarity with the basic articulation concepts of phonetics and the IPA is particularly useful for SCA heralds, who must frequently pronounce names from languages whose orthographic conventions differ significantly from those in English. For example, many native speakers of American English unfamiliar with Irish orthography mispronounce the name Siobhán (/ʃɪˈvɔːn/ in a more informed English pronunciation). IPA allows name pronunciation to be recorded accurately and understood by non-native speakers. Use of IPA also allows the herald not only to record a pronunciation that is closer to that of the language a name is derived from, but also to record idiosyncratic pronunciations preferred by a particular individual using a name.

Additionally, an understanding of IPA also allows the herald to learn how to produce sounds that do not occur in their native language or languages. For example, the Welsh name Llwyd (frequently anglicized as Lloyd) is pronounced [ɬʊɨd]. The sound /ɬ/ is a voiceless alveolar lateral fricative, represented orthographically in Welsh by the ⟨ll⟩ character. This means that this sound is produced by touching the tip of the tongue to the alveolar ridge and forcing air between the sides of the tongue and the molars, without vibrating the vocal cords. Through an understanding of phonetics and how IPA representations indicate articulation, the herald can learn how to pronounce this sound (and others) appropriately.

[3] This particular difference between orthography and pronunciation is due both to changes in vowels due to the Great Vowel Shift (1400-1700) and to the loss of the sound /h/ from English (represented orthographically in Middle English as ⟨gh⟩), which shifted to /f/ in the case of "cough" and was dropped entirely in the case of "though."