

Phonetic Transcription Guideline

Icelandic

Icelandic Phonetic Transcription

For the Icelandic language there is no special pronunciation dictionary. However, the relationship between spelling and pronunciation is quite regular, with only a few minor exceptions. As reference handbooks we recommend:

- Eiríkur Rögnvaldsson: *Íslensk hljóðfræði*. [Icelandic Phonetics.] Reykjavík 1989, Institute of Linguistics, University of Iceland.
- Indriði Gíslason and Höskuldur Þráinsson: *Handbók um íslenskan framburð*. [Handbook of Icelandic Pronunciation.] Reykjavík 1993, Research Institute, Iceland University of Education.

1 Icelandic Phoneme System – Overview

The Icelandic phoneme system can be divided into two groups:

- consonants and
- vowels.

Furthermore, it is possible to distinguish five types of Icelandic consonants:

- plosives,
- fricatives,
- nasals,
- laterals and
- trills/taps.

Within the vowel group, a further distinction can be made between monophthongs and diphthongs. All Icelandic vowels can be either long or short.

The following table will give you an overview about the phonemes of the Icelandic SAMPA and IPA symbol set, grouped by the phoneme classes to which they belong (according to the manner of their articulation).

2 Icelandic Symbol Set Grouped by Phoneme Classes

Phoneme Class	SAMPA	IPA	Examples of Usage		
Consonants	Plosives	b	p	bera	/bE:ra/
		p	p ^h	pera	/pE:ra/
		d	t	dalur	/da:lYr/
		t	t ^h	tala	/ta:la/
		J_	c	gera	/J_E:ra/
		c	c ^h	kæla	/cai:la/
		g	k	galdur	/galdYr/
		k	k ^h	kaldur	/kaldYr/
	Fricatives	f	f	finna	/fIna/
		v	v	vera	/vE:ra/
		D	ð	viður	/vI:DYr/
		T	θ	þunnur	/TYnYr/
		s	s	sofa	/sO:va/
		j	ʃ	játa	/jau:da/
		C	ç	hjóla	/Cou:la/
		G	ɣ	saga	/sa:Ga/
		x	x	rækta	/raixda/
		h	h	halda	/halda/
	Nasals	m	m	muna	/mY:na/
		n	n	von	/vO:n/
		J	ɲ	angi	/auJJ_I/
		N	ŋ	langur	/lauNgYr/
		m0	ɱ	glampa	/glam0ba/
		n0	ɳ	hnefi	/n0E:vI/
		J0	ɲ̥	banki	/bauJ0J_I/
		N0	ŋ̥	hönk	/h9YN0g/
	Laterals	l	l	sæla	/sai:la/
		l0	ɭ	velta	/vEI0da/
	Taps/Trills	r	r/r	fara	/fa:ra/
		r0	ɽ/ɽ̥	hraði	/r0a:DI/

Vowels	Single Vowels	I	hitta	/hIhda/
	I:	ɪ:	siður	/sɪ:DYr/
	i	i	ískra	/isgra/
	i:	i:	nýta	/ni:da/
	E	ɛ	nesti	/nEsdI/
	E:	ɛ:	lesa	/lE:sa/
	a	a	aska	/asga/
	a:	a:	aka	/a:ga/
	Y	Y	undra	/Yndra/
	Y:	Y:	muna	/mY:na/
	9	œ	öskur	/9sgYr/
	9:	œ:	böl	/b9:l/
	u	u	kústur	/kUSDYr/
	u:	u:	súpa	/su:ba/
	O	ɔ	ostur	/OsdYr/
	O:	ɔ:	nota	/nO:da/
	Diphthongs	au	ást	/ausd/
		au:	láta	/lau:da/
		ou	ósk	/ousg/
		ou:	ljós	/ljou:s/
		ei	einn	/eidn0/
		ei:	leika	/lei:ga/
		ai	ætla	/aihdlA/
		ai:	æfa	/ai:va/
		9y	haust	/h9ysd/
		9y:	laus	/l9y:s/
		Yi	hugi	/hYijI/
		Oi	bogi	/bOijI/

3 Icelandic Consonants

The standard Icelandic consonant system is considered to have

- eight plosives,
- ten fricatives,
- eight nasals
- two laterals and
- two trills (taps).

3.1 Plosives

There are four unaspirated and four aspirated plosives in Icelandic, which can be arranged in pairs:

Unaspirated			Aspirated		
/b/	bera	/bE:ra/	/p/	pota	/pO:da/
/d/	dagur	/da:GYr/	/t/	tala	/ta:la/
/c/	kisa	/cl:sa/	/J_/	gera	/J_E:ra/
/k/	kol	/kO:l/	/g/	garður	/garDYr/

All Icelandic plosives are voiceless (even though the unaspirated ones may occasionally become partly voiced intervocalically).

3.2 Fricatives

There are ten fricatives in Icelandic, four voiced and six voiceless.

Voiced			Voiceless		
/v/	vinur	/vl:nYr/	/f/	fundur	/fYndYr/
/D/	lúður	/lu:DYr/	/T/	þröstur	/þr9sdYr/
			/s/	salur	/sa:lYr/
/j/	jaðar	/ja:Dar/	/C/	hjala	/Ca:la/
/G/	nægur	/nai:GYr/	/x/	rækta	/raixda/
			/h/	hús	/hu:s/

The sounds /v/ and /j/ could just as well be considered approximants, but it is customary to classify them as fricatives.

3.3 Nasals

Icelandic has nasals with four different places of articulation. Furthermore, all of these nasals can be either voiced or voiceless, so that the nasal system consist of eight sounds.

Voiced			Voiceless		
/m/	tómur	/tou:mYr/	/m0/	tómt	/toum0d/
/n/	nótt	/nouhd/	/n0/	hnafi	/n0E:vl/
/J/	lengi	/leiJl/	/J0/	hanki	/hauJ0l/
/N/	langur	/lauNYr/	/N0/	langt	/lauNd/

3.4 Laterals

There are two laterals in Icelandic; /l/ and /l0/.

Voiced			Voiceless		
/l/	salur	/sa:lYr/	/l0/	piltur	/pɪl0dYr/

3.5 Trills

There are two trills in Icelandic; /r/ and /r0/.

Voiced			Voiceless		
/r/	rót	/rou:d/	/r0/	hrífa	/r0i:va/

The short voiced trill is exceptionally short, only about 1/3 of the length of a normal short consonant. Phonetically, it is thus more like a tap than a trill. For the sake of consistency, we have chosen to transcribe it as /r/ instead of /r/, since there is never any contrast between trills and taps in Icelandic.

4 Icelandic Vowels

4.1 Long and Short Vowels

Icelandic vowels are either long or short. There are eight long vowels and eight short ones.

Short			Long		
/i/	ískra	/isgra/	/i:/	nýta	/ni:da/
/l/	hitta	/hlhda/	/l:/	siður	/si:DYr/
/E/	nesti	/nEsd/	/E:/	lesa	/lE:sa/
/a/	aska	/asga/	/a:/	aka	/a:ga/
/Y/	undra	/Yndra/	/Y:/	muna	/mY:na/
/9/	öskur	/9sgYr/	/9:/	böl	/b9:l/
/u/	kústur	/kUSDYr/	/u:/	súpa	/su:ba/
/O/	ostur	/OsdYr/	/O:/	nota	/nO:da/

Phonetically, this description of some of the vowels is not quite correct. The Icelandic /a/, for instance, is always transcribed as [a] in IPA, although it is a central vowel and would more correctly be transcribed as [ɐ] in IPA – /ə/ in SAMPA. The vowel /9/ is also more central than the transcription would indicate, and sounds in many cases rather similar to schwa (/ə/ in SAMPA, [ɐ] in IPA). However, we have chosen to stick to the tradition here, since that can never cause any misunderstandings.

4.2 Diphthongs

Some of these vowels are combined as diphthongs. Most of them can also be either short or long. The seven diphthongs in Icelandic should be transcribed like this:

Short			Long		
/au/	ást	/ausd/	/au:/	láta	/lau:da/
/ou/	ósk	/ousg/	/ou:/	ljós	/ljou:s/
/ei/	einn	/eidn0/	/ei:/	leika	/lei:ga/
/ai/	ætla	/aihla/	/ai:/	æpa	/ai:Pa/
/9y/	haust	/h9ysd/	/9y:/	laus	/l9y:s/
/Yi/	hugi	/hYijl/			
/Oi/	bogi	/bOijl/			

The diphthongs /Yi/ and /Oi/ only occur in special environments (before /j/), whereas all the others have a relatively free distribution.

5 Specific Icelandic Transcription Methods

5.1 Long Consonants

A number of Icelandic consonants (/b, d, J_, G, f, s, m, n, l, r/) can be (phonetically) long in medial and final position. Thus, we have a distinction

klasi vs. klassi
vina vs. vinna

However, the length of the consonant is always related to the length of the preceding vowel; long consonant after a short vowel and vice versa. Since vowel length is much more salient than consonant length in Icelandic, there is no reason to mark consonant length in the transcription.

5.2 Plosives

In initial and final position, all plosives are unaspirated in the majority dialect, such that written *p*, *t*, *k* are pronounced /b/, /d/, /k/ (/J_/), respectively.

/k/ /g/ and /c/ /J_/ are in a near-complementary distribution, the former occurring before back vowels, the latter before front vowels. However, there are some minimal pairs which make it necessary to use two pairs of symbols.

Written geminate *pp*, *tt*, *kk* stands for preaspiration (the sound /h/ + an unaspirated short plosive).

In nonstandard pronunciation, an unvoiced glottal stop (IPA [ʔ] sometimes occurs instead of or preceding an unaspirated plosive. This sound can be transcribed by the symbol /ʔ/ in SAMPA. Examples: *Bjarni* /bjaʔdn/, *fótbolti* /fouʔbOI0dl/.

5.3 Fricatives

In initial position, /f/, /T/, /x/, and /v/, /D/, /G/, respectively, are for the most part in complementary distribution; the former occurring before voiceless sounds and the latter before voiced sounds. This does not at all correspond to the writing conventions. For instance, intervocalic /v/ is almost always written *f*, G is always written *g*; and /x/ can be represented by *k*, *g*, and *x*.

The sounds /D/, /G/ and /x/ usually do not occur in initial position. However, /x/ is used for written *hv* in a minority dialect. /D/ is also used initially for written *þ* in reduced forms of some pronouns and adverbs in continuous speech.

/C/ only occurs in initial position, in words beginning with written *hj* or *hé*.

/h/ occurs initially and as the first sound in non-initial parts of compounds. It also occurs medially in preaspiration constructions, written *pp*, *tt*, *kk* and *p*, *t*, *k* + *l*, *n*.

5.4 Nasals

Of the eight nasals, /m/ and /n/ can be considered basic; all the others can be said to be derived from these two in special environments. However, we can find phonemic contrasts which warrant the use of special symbols for these eight sounds.

The voiceless nasals occur in medial position before written *p*, *t*, *k*. Furthermore, /n0/ represents written *hn* in initial position.

/J/ is always represented by the combination *ng* or *nk* where *g/k* stands for a palatal plosive; /N/ is always represented by the combinations *ng* or *nk* where *g/k* stands for a velar plosive.

5.5 Laterals

The voiceless lateral only occurs under certain circumstances; in medial position before written *p*, *t*, *k*, and in initial position in words written with *hl*. There are phonemic contrasts between the voiced and the voiceless lateral which make it necessary to use special symbols for the unvoiced one.

5.6 Trills

The voiceless trill only occurs under certain circumstances; in medial position before written *p*, *t*, *k*, *s*, and in initial position in words written with *hr*. There are phonemic contrasts between the voiced and the voiceless trill which make it necessary to use special symbols for the unvoiced one.

5.7 Consonant Clusters

Since Icelandic is an inflectional language with a highly productive morphology, long consonant clusters often arise in medial and final position due to the concatenation of morphemes. In the spoken language, such consonant clusters are very often simplified by syncope, assimilation, or both. It is for instance common for the middle consonant in a cluster of three to be deleted. Care must be taken to distinguish among the processes of this kind that are completely natural, even in formal speech, and those that are mainly found in casual allegro speech.