

Schwa—Use of the Term in Modern General Linguistics

In modern general linguistics the term *schwa* is used in a number of distinct senses (Van Oostendorp 1998, Silverman 2011). In the scholarly literature it is usually spelled according to the German orthography, although *shva* and *sheva* are also found.

Broadly speaking, the term has two different meanings in modern general linguistics. Most commonly *schwa* refers to a vowel of a certain ‘neutral’ acoustic quality, e.g. the vowel in the second syllable of the English word *model*. The other meaning is a vowel which alternates with zero; an example is the second vowel in the Hindi word *dewar* ‘brother in law’, which does not show up in the related word *dewrani* ‘brother in law’s wife’, Ohala 1999). This second use of the term has given rise to a (folk) etymology of the word, which derives it from the Sanskrit *svarabhakti* ‘epenthesis’ (from Sanskrit *svara* ‘vowel’ and *bhakti* ‘divide’).

In neither of its two main meanings does *schwa* denote an unambiguously specific vowel. Thus, while the International Phonetic Association IPA has assigned the symbol /ə/ to schwa in its International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA 1999; the term *schwa* is ‘unofficial’, since symbols do not have official names in IPA, only phonetic descriptions), Pullum and Ladusaw (1996:48) note that this symbol is used “for a range of distinguishable non-peripheral vowels for which other symbols could also be used” and that “there is a wide range of variation in the articulatory descriptions given to Schwa by American phoneticians”. This is so probably because schwa is realized without an independent constriction in the mouth (Browman and Goldstein 1992).

The second meaning, too, can be refined in several ways. The fact that a vowel alternates with zero in a given language may be due to at least two different historical processes, deletion and epenthesis. The Hindi example given above is probably an example of the latter; an example of the former may be found in (varieties of) French, where *petit* can be pronounced with a neutral vowel in the first syllable, or with no vowel there at all ([pti]; Eychenne 2006).

The reason why the two interpretations of the term are easily confused is that in many languages they converge. The neutral vowel can be easily epenthésized or deleted, and conversely, if a language deletes or epenthésizes a vowel, it is very often the neutral vowel. However, it is not always the case that neutral vowels and deletion go together; thus Bolozky (2005) identifies a ‘new’ schwa in Modern Hebrew, which alternates with zero but has a low front articulation [ɛ], while the literature on French has a tradition of recognizing a ‘stable’ schwa, which has a quality similar to [ə], but does not alternate (e.g. Morin 1978).

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