Some remarks on '*Avanesov*ietic' Russian vowels

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1. These preliminary remarks are meant to be of help to those who ought to undergo certain readings by Avanesov (or others derived from his own ones) in order not to believe the same old Sovietic tales (in this specific case, with no political, social, or humanitarian, reference), that still live on. Concerning how to treat the vowels of Russian, let us carefully pass over certain exaggerations, but without ignoring real characteristics, as we will see, in particular, about traditional and mediatic pronunciations.

However, those who are not burning with curiosity, or are not obliged to use material from that 'school of phonetics', may completely skip these remarks. Anyway, we are here presenting something that might be useful to make the phonic situation of Russian vowels clear. For *international* pronunciation, we only need 8 vocoids: [i, e, ɛ, a, ɐ, ɔ, u, ɨ] (*fig* 1.1). For *native-like international* pronunciation, we have to use 13 symbols: [i, ɪ, e, ɛ, a, ɐ, ɔ; ʊ, u, ɯ, ɨ, ɤ] (*fig* 1.2). For *modern neutral* pronunciation, we need 16 (or 18) of them: [i, ɪ; e, ɛ, ɐ; ʌ, a, ɐ, ɤ; ʊ, ɔ, ɵ; ɯ, u; ɨ, ɤ] (adding the intermediate [iˈ, ɨˈ], if desired (*fig* 2.1). For *traditional neutral* pronunciation, 25 symbols are needed (or 26, including an intermediate timbre, [aˈ]): [i, ɪ, ɘ, ɜ, e, ɛ, ɐ, ʌ, a, ɐ, ɤ, ɔ, ɔ, ɵ, ɵ, u, ɯ, ʉ, ʊ, ʊ̟, ʊ̞, ɨ, ɤ, ə, ɜ] (*fig* 2.2). For *mediatic* pronunciation (grounded on Moscow usage) we need 28 different symbols (or 30, including intermediate [iˈ, ɯˈ] (*fig* 3.1): [i, ɪ, ɪ̈, ɘ, e, ɛ, ɜ, ɐ, ʌ, a, ʌ, ɜ, ʒ, ɔ, ɔ, ʊ, u, ɯ, ʉ, ʊ̟, ɯ, ɨ, ɤ, ə, ɻ, ɤ, ɣ]. All this is indeed aimed at specifically showing the objective reality of our phonic facts, as one can easily verify, just by listening to some good sound material.

2. Instead, the Soviet fancy tales –concerning Russian vowels in stressed syllables– use 6 'fundamental symbols' (although '*pravda*ly' denying the very existence of the phoneme /ɨ/): *u, e, a, o, y, ы,* corresponding to /i, ɛ, a, ɔ, u, ɨ/ [i, ɛ, a, ɔ, u, ɨ]. Besides, 3 more are used in unstressed syllables: *ь, ъ, ʌ* – *ie* [ɪ, ɤ, ɐ]. Let us point out that, quite needlessly, *ь* [ɪ] has an absurd duplicate: *э*! The *IPA* value of [ə] is quite different from [ɪ] (however, *ʌ* is less improper, although too similar to some Cyrillic *л*: *IPA* [ʌ], our [ɐ]). Some other authors, in fact, use *ə, э*, respectively, for [ɤ, ɛ], which are somewhat more faithful phonically. But the use of Cyrillic graphemes as phonic symbols is even more misleading in books written in Western languages, especially if we consider *u, y* (that we intentionally show using characters not different from the Latin ones, instead of *u*, *y*, or и, у, for instance).

3. But, let us go back to the 'original' author (Аванесов /avaˈn(j)ɛsaf/), who is 'bizarrely peculiar' indeed. However, he is not the only one, in the different national traditions, pretending to use phonic symbols by resorting to ordinary graphemes 'disguised' as phones and phonemes. And, of course, several diacritics are added, which are quite prone to any kind of criticism in every way, both typographically and mnemonically, in order to easily recognize and use them.

Therefore, among the various symbols, we also find: *û* for /i/ in /ÇiÇ, Çii/ [i(˃)], *ê* for /ɛ/ in /ÇɛÇ, Çɛi/ [e], *ə̂* for /ɛ/ in /CɛÇ, ɛÇ, Cɛi, ɛi/, which is nothing but [CɛÇ, ɛÇ, Cɛi, ɛi], with its transition (easily seen on spectrograms) from a vocoid to a contoid, with a palatal coloring, some other times rendered as *ɘᵘ*. But that is a clearly automatic and quite natural fact, which has no need at all to be shown. In fact, the timbre of *ə̂*/*ɘᵘ* is not at all closer. But just an acoustic transition is present, indeed. It would almost be like wanting to 'transcribe' in Italian *[adʒˈdʒɛjʎʎo, -ejʎʎo], instead of [adʒˈdʒɛʎːʎo, -eʎːʎo] for *Azeglio*.

4. And now, we begin a sadly amusing trip to… the circus. As a matter of fact, certain authors resort even to 'exponential' magic –be it noted expressly– in 'scientific works'. Thus, we find so-called 'symbols' as: *uᵉ* /iˈ/ [ɪˈ], *ʁɪᵊ* /ɨˈ/ [ɨˈ], *ʁᵘ* /ˌɨ/ [ˌɨ], *eᵘ* /#ˌi/ [ˌɪ] (for unstressed initial ɘ-). However, given this scientifically inconsistent principle, other authors use *ʁɪᵉ* for *ʁɪᵊ* /ɨˈ/ [ɨˈ], *uᵊ* for *uᵉ* /iˈ/ [ɪˈ], *ɘᵘ* for *eᵘ* /#ˌi/ [ˌɪ], and *eᵘ* for *ʁɪᵊ* /ɨˈ/ [ɨˈ].

Arguably, exponents spread in further cases of transition: to or from /Ç/, and to /i/. Thus, in addition, we find: *aᵘ* /aÇ, ai/ [aÇ, ai] (also rendered as *a·* – as only true magicians can do), *oᵘ* /σÇ, σi/ [σÇ, σi] (also as *o·*), and *yᵘ* /uÇ, ui/ [uÇ, ui], too (obviously, as *y·*, as well). Somebody uses *ʁɪ·* or *ʁɪᵘ* /ɨÇ, ɨi/ [ɨÇ, ɨi], too. But that is not enough, yet: we also find ('Hey, c'mon in, folks!'): *ᵘa* /Ça/ [Ça] (and *·a*), *ᵘo* /Çσ/ [Çσ] (and *·o*), *ᵘy* /Çu/ [Çu] (and *·y*), including *j·a, j·o, j·y* /ja, jσ, ju/ [ja, jσ, ju]!

All these –with their usual, and purely acoustic, transitions– have no real timbre change, except a little in traditional and mediatic pronunciations. Thus, some authors, *cum grano salis*, at least unify 'pre- and post-dotted symbols', by using *ȧ, ȯ, ẏ*.

In addition, we also find *ä, ö, ÿ* (rendered as *ᵘaᵘ, ᵘoᵘ, ᵘyᵘ*, too), for /ÇaÇ, ÇσÇ, ÇuÇ, Çai, Çσi, Çui/. In fact, these have slightly different timbres in modern neutral pronunciation, too: [ÇʌÇ, ÇʊÇ, ÇɯÇ, Çʌi, Çʊi, Çɯi] (and a little more different in traditional neutral, and mediatic, pronunciation). Occasionally, we can find some instances of *ᵘe* [jɛ, jeÇ], *ʸo* '[wσ]', which –in reality– is [ɯσ] (with a *semi*approximant [ɯ], that occurs in *y* [ɯu] as well, in stressed syllables).

5. On the other hand, even though our authors do not mention it at all, we have a prevelar semiapproximant [ɨ̟], too. Still in stressed syllables, it occurs in front of /ɛ, a, ɨ/: [ɨ̟ɛ, ɨ̟a, ɨ̟ɨ]. Seeing that, sometimes –as very able professional circus people– they use *ᵘeˇ*, for /Çɛ(#)/ [Çɛ(ɑ#)], at least to be consistent, they should also use *eˇ* (or *ɘˇ*), and *aˇ*, *oˇ*, even in front of /C, #/. In fact, by empha-

sis, in neutral pronunciation, we regularly have: [ˈɐɑ, ˈɑɐ, ˈʊɵ]. Therefore, they might perhaps use *ᵇe* (or, better, *ᵇɜ*), *ᵇa, ᵇʚ* for [ɟɐ, ɟa, ɟɨ] /ɐ, a, ɨ/, too.

6. Those authors who are brave enough to free themselves from fake Soviet-ic phonic symbols, and at least use *offIPA* symbols, can resort to '[i; e, ɛ; æ, a; ɵ, ɔ; ʉ, u; ɨ]', in stressed syllables; or to '[ɪ, ɤ, ə]', in unstressed syllables; while they oscillate between '[ɐ, a; ɪ, i; ɤ, ɨ]', in pre-stress syllables (or pretonic ones, in the true sense of the word as stressed syllables, which –obviously– occur right in front of tonic and protonic syllables, *ie* stressed syllables in tunes and protunes). Arguably, those authors may use some or all of the official symbols just seen, in spite of their obvious limitations. But, at least, people are not obliged to look for some expert medium, in order to find solutions that… do not solve anything.

Some other authors use hybrid symbols, among which '[y]' for /ɨ/ stands certainly out (due to an unduly clear influence by transliteration; and they do so for consonants, as well).

7. Also within *offIPA*, for two good reasons, transcriptions as '[ɛᵊ; aᵊ; ɔᵊ, oᵊ]' and '[eⁱ; ɛⁱ; aⁱ; ɔⁱ, oⁱ]' are unsuitable. First of all, because a notation as '[Vᵊ, Vⁱ]' is clearly excessive, since it indicates mere acoustic transitions to following phones. It is decidedly misleading, although the exponent is there just to suggest a tendency or coloring, rather than a real vocoid. However, it is decidedly misleading.

Secondly, such transcriptions are not suitable because, as we have already seen, their phonic reality is not '[Vᵊ, Vⁱ]' (and, least of all, '[Və, Vi]'). Rather, it is: [ɟɐ, ɟa, ɟɨ, ɷʊ, ɷu] (and, in case, something more like '[ᵊɐ, ᵊa, ᵊɨ, ᵘʊ, ᵘu]', where [ᵊ, ᵘ] are consonantal –*ie* semiapproximants, to be true– and the stress is on the real vocoids there. Thus, we actually have [ɟɐ, ɟa, ɟɨ, ɷʊ, ɷu], *ie* [CV], not [VV], nor [VV]. As we have already seen above, in modern neutral pronunciation, only by emphasis, do we have [ˈɟɐɑ, ˈɟɑɐ, ˈɷʊɵ], but [ˈjii, ˈɟɨɨ, ˈɷuu].

Equally unsuitable (and, frankly, horrible for the eyes) are transcriptions like: '[ⁱeⁱ; ⁱɛⁱ; ⁱæⁱ, ⁱaⁱ; ⁱɔⁱ, ⁱoⁱ, ⁱɵⁱ; ⁱuⁱ, ⁱʉⁱ]' and '[ⁱɛᵊ; ⁱaᵊ; ⁱɔᵊ, ⁱoᵊ; ⁱuᵊ]' or '[ᵘɔᵊ, ᵘoᵊ; ᵘuᵊ]', again because the second exponent, [Vᵊ], simply indicates the acoustic transition to [Ç] or [C], perfectly automatic and natural. The first exponent, [ⁱV], on the other hand, just hints at the transition from [Ç] (inluding [j]) to a following vocoid. That transition is clear and audible (and, of course, visible on the spectrograms), both for [j] and the other (palatalized) contoids, [Ç]. Thus, it must be explicitly indicated, as [jV] and [ÇV].

8. However, within *canIPA*, instead, some use of exponents does have a good reason, since it can conveniently show some peculiarities of the mediatic Russian accent (*cf* our last two vocograms: *fig* 3.2), where they actually stand for very short vocoids, not as mere automatic –and inevitable– acoustic transitions. Of course, *fig* 0 certainly helps to better understand all our vocograms.

Аванесов, Р. И. (1972⁵) *Русское литературное произношение*. Москва: Просвещение.
Canepari, L. (2007) *Natural Phonetics & Tonetics.* München: Lincom Europa.
— (2007²) *A Handbook of Pronunciation.* München: Lincom Europa (Ch 1: Prelude & Ch 8: Russian).

fig 0. *International Russian orograms*

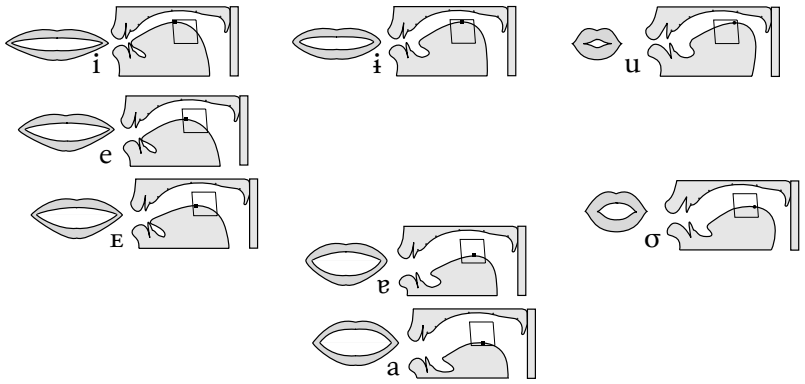


fig 1.1. *International (simplified) Russian*

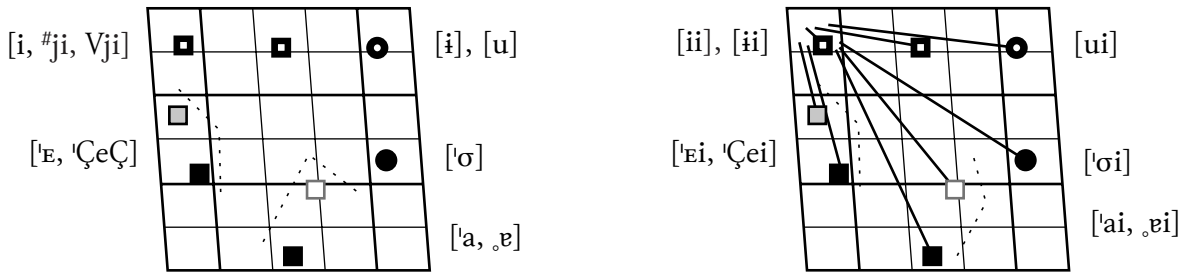


fig 1.2. *International native-like Russian*

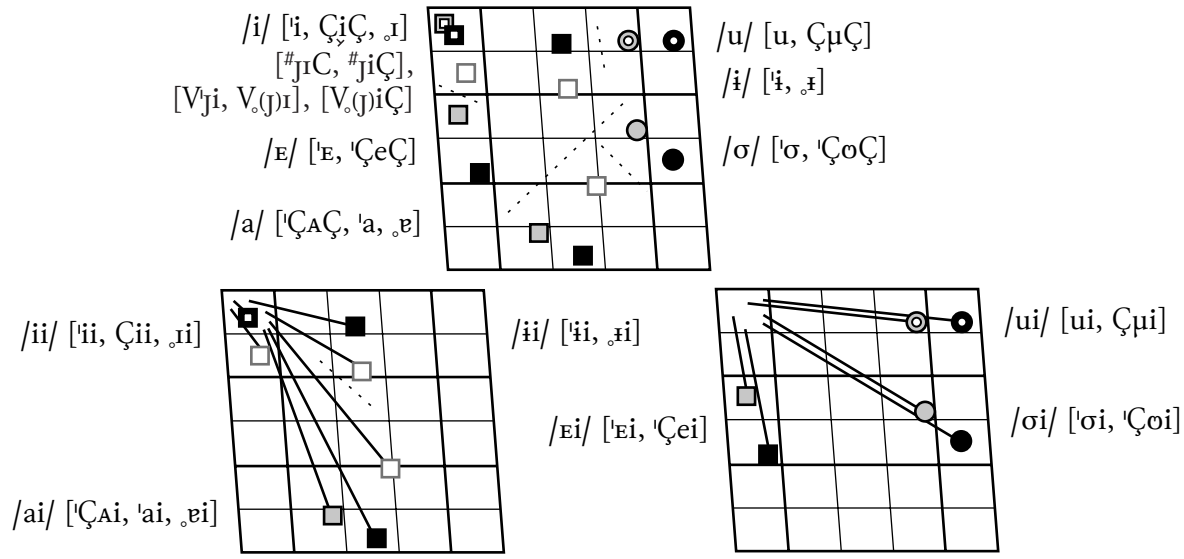
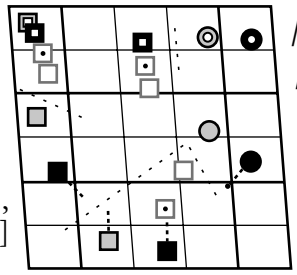
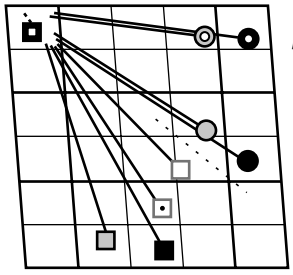


fig 2.1. *Modern Neutral Russian*





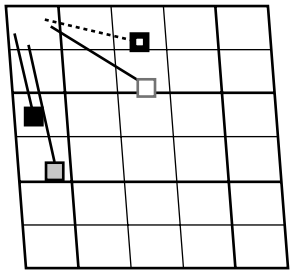
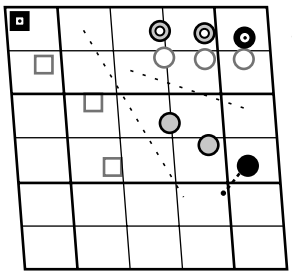
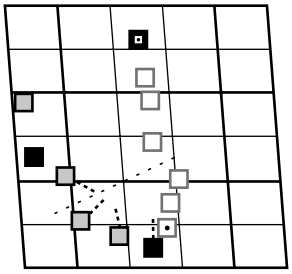
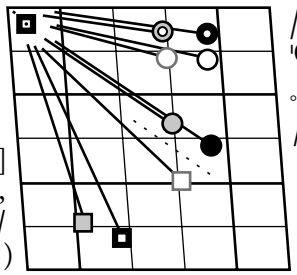


fig 2.2. *Traditional Neutral Russian*







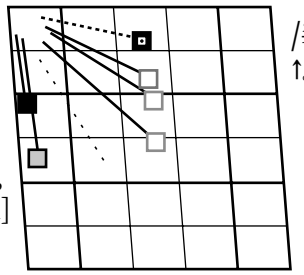


fig 3.1. *Mediatic (Moscow) Russian: basic elements*

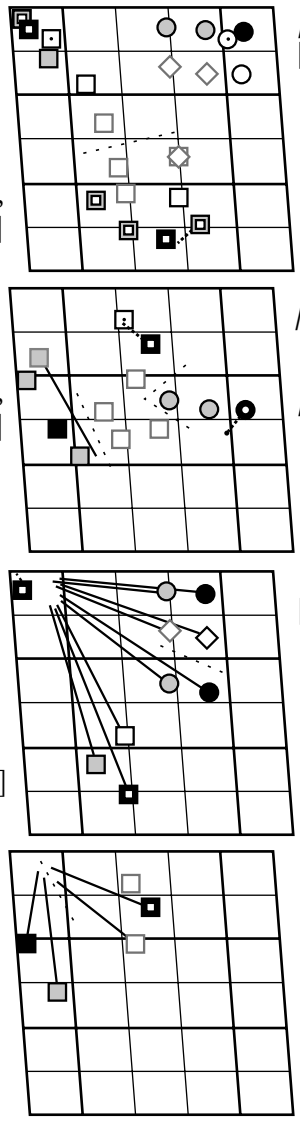


fig 3.2. *Mediatic (Moscow) Russian: additional marked elements*