Unicode for beginners

MICHAEL BULLEY

How to send phonetic characters safely from one computer to another

THIS ARTICLE springs from my experiences when I submitted a piece to *English Today* that contained characters from the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). I had used a font containing such characters that came with my word-processing program, and I submitted the article electronically as a file attachment. Unfortunately, the characters did not arrive in the same form as they had left, owing to incompatibility between the two computer systems, and so there were parts of the article that did not make much sense. The editor graciously reprinted it in its correct form in the following issue (*ET*80).

That experience caused me to learn about Unicode, which is the standard form to be used if you have a Western-type keyboard and wish to input characters outside the normal set. Of course, it would have been better if I had known about this beforehand. Those who are expert in Unicode need read no further, as what follows is for those who are in the state of ignorance that I was. If you wish to learn about Unicode in detail, a good place to start is the phonetician John Wells's website at <www.phon.ucl.ac/home/wells/ipa-unicode.htm>.

The first thing you need to do is install on your computer a Unicode font that contains the characters you are interested in: in my case, the IPA characters. Two such fonts are Doulos SIL and Lucida Sans Unicode. They can easily be found on the Internet and downloaded; you just add them to your other fonts in the normal way. Then you need to have a word-processing program that accepts Unicode. If, as with me, your computer system is not the most modern, this might be a problem. If you do not want to buy a more up-to-date word-processing program, one solution is to download Open Office, at <OpenOffice.org>. This comes free. It looks and works like Microsoft Word and is Unicode compatible.

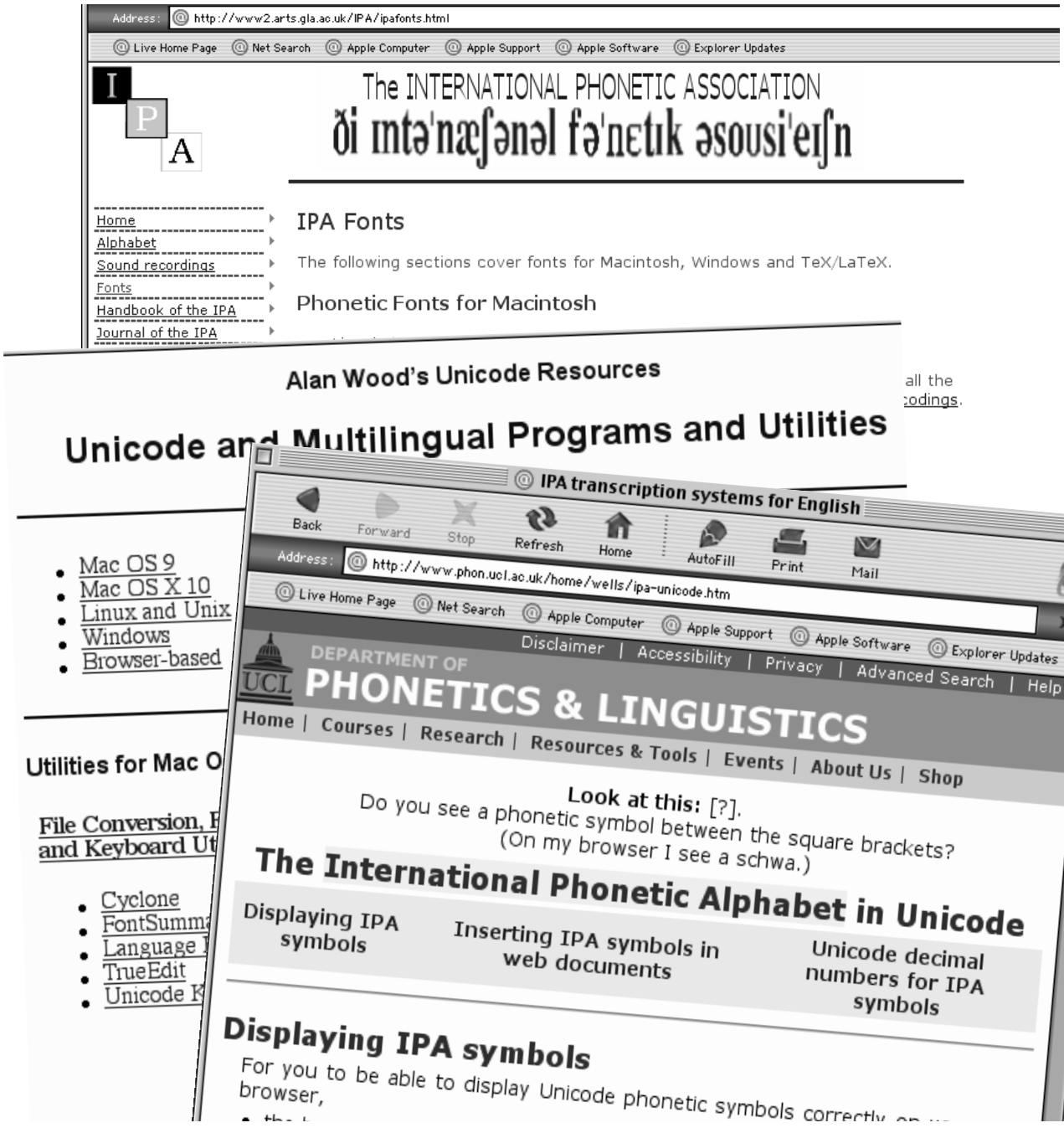
The question now is how to put Unicode characters such the IPA symbols into a document. If your computer runs on the Windows system, one way of inputting characters that are not on the keyboard is to use the Windows utility called Character Map. With less up-to-date versions of Windows, however, this will show only the basic range. Fortunately, there are some user-friendly programs that can be downloaded from the Internet, that allow you to use the full range of characters in your Unicode font. Some of these can be found on Alan Wood's website <www.alanwood.net/unicode/utilities>. I have experimented with the program BabelMap and I find it works well.

This, then, is what you would do to make a non-standard character appear on your computer screen using BabelMap. You open up BabelMap, choose the set that contains your character (it might be found, for example, in IPA, or Latin Extended A, or Cyrillic). The characters appear in boxes. You click on the one you want and then on Copy. Then, in your word-processing program (maybe Open Office) you set the font to a Unicode one and

MICHAEL BULLEY studied Classics and linguistics at the universities of Edinburgh and London, then spent twenty-odd years teaching Classics in state education in various places in England. In 2002, he qualified as a teacher of English in French national education and taught for a time in Dijon before deciding to move to Chalon-sur-Saône to try to continue earning a living in language work but in a less organized way. He has appeared several times in ET and has contributed articles to journals on Classical, linguistic and philosophical topics.

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click on Paste. The character should then appear.

If you send your document electronically as an attached file in an email, it is still a good idea to add a covering note to ensure that the person at the other end will set the receiving computer to accept Unicode. As Unicode is the universal standard, the special characters should arrive exactly as they were sent, and the recipient can confidently edit the document, if necessary. Another possibility is to convert your document to pdf format in Adobe and send it like that. This makes it more secure, though not so easy immediately to edit. And, of course, if you want to be quite sure there is no doubt about what you intended, you can trust the postman and send a back-up paper copy. ■

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