

VOICE COMMUNICATIONS -- ITU PHONETICS, WHY?  
Adapted from an original article by D. W. Thorne, K6SOJ

From the earliest days of radiotelephone communications, several different “official” phonetic alphabets have been used. During WW II the British used one version, while the U.S. had another. Others forces had yet even different phonetic alphabets.

The use of ITU phonetics in both tactical and formal message (record) traffic handling is essential for accurate and efficient communications. (It is recommended to use them on a daily basis just to keep in practice.) It is my experience that some hams simply haven’t ever researched “the why”. Others just haven’t ever taken the time to learn them.

In 1947 the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), adopted rules and procedures that standardized phonetics. The reason? TO SAVE LIVES. There are documented incidents where aircraft (and lives) have been lost as a result of phone traffic being misunderstood or unreadable as a result of non-standard phonetics and thereby miss-communication between pilots (usually by those whose primary language was not English) and ground control stations.

In 1956 the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) adopted the ICAO phonetic alphabet. Today it is THE worldwide standard for military, naval, civilian aeronautical and maritime, search and rescue groups, public safety, (law enforcement being an exception); and...the A.R.R.L.

Following are a few reasons that the ITU Phonetic alphabet is used by proficient EMCOMM and NTS radiotelephone operators:

1. It is the INTERNATIONAL standard. Operators for whom English is not their primary language can clearly spell out a word that is difficult to copy. Use of standard ITU phonetics is crucial under conditions of weak or poor propagation or interference. I know personally, of an incident, where EMERGENCY traffic (reporting a traffic accident), originated by an operator with a heavy foreign accent (who was visiting in the U.S.), calling for assistance on 2 meters FM was bungled, because the responding ham did not understand ITU phonetics.
2. In handling RADIOGRAMS, or other traffic, a skilled operator that is familiar with ITU phonetics will automatically recognize that a phonetic is NOT part of the text of the message. If non-standard phonetics are used, it may confuse the receiving operator and delay the traffic.
3. It sounds “professional” and is efficient.

ITU phonetics with the correct pronunciation:

A-Alfa	“AL-FAH”
B-Bravo	“BRAH-VOH”
C-Charlie	“CHAR-LEE” or “SHAR-LEE”
D-Delta	“DELL-TAH”

E-Echo	“ECK-OH”
F-Foxtrot	“FOKS-TROT”
G-Golf	“GOLF”
H-Hotel	“HOH-TELL”
I-India	“IN-DEE-AH”
J-Juliett	“JEW-LEE-ETT”
K-Kilo	“KEE-LOH”
L-Lima	“LEE-MAH”
M-Mike	“MIKE”
N-November	“NO-VEM-BER”
O-Oscar	“OSS-CAH”
P-Papa	“PAH-PAH”
Q-Quebec	“KEH-BECK”
R-Romeo	“ROW-ME-OH”
S-Sierra	“SEE-AIR-RAH”
T-Tango	“TANG-GO”
U-Uniform	“YOU-NEE-FORM” or “OO-NEE-FORM”
V-Victor	“VIK-TAH”
W-Whiskey	“WISS-KEY”
X-X-ray	“ECKS-RAY”
Y-Yankee	“YANG-KEY”
Z-Zulu	“ZOO-LOO”

Numbers pronunciation:

- 0 - “ZEE-RO”
- 1 - “WUN”
- 2 - “TOO”
- 3 - “TH-UH-REE” or “TREE”
- 4 - “FOW-ER”
- 5 - “FI-IV” or “FIFE”
- 6 - “SIX”
- 7 - “SEV-EN”
- 8 - “ATE” or “A-IT”
- 9 - “NIN-ER”

DECIMAL = “DAY-SEE-MAL”

#### 4. ANOMALIES and IDIOSYNCRASIES:

- a. To distinguish “Z” from “C” on phone, it is common practice to say “zed” (an old British phonetic) for “Z”, especially when saying a call sign. “Zed” is shorter (one syllable vs. two for “zulu”.) However, in formal traffic, the ITU: “ZULU” is more correct and proper.
- b. “ROGER” (an early phonetic) is still used for “received” (equivalent of sending “R” in Morse) - It does NOT mean “yes” or “affirmative”. It only means: “I have received your message completely.”

5. Encourage everyone to be proficient in ALL ITU phonetics so they can be prepared for any situation, especially NET Control duties and emergency communication.

[http://www.emcomm.org/svares/training/itu\\_phonetics\\_10\\_30\\_2001.htm](http://www.emcomm.org/svares/training/itu_phonetics_10_30_2001.htm)