

Listening words: how to describe a voice



Shared words for describing what we hear in a voice clip. Institute of Thinking made this list for its own research and shares it under the CC BY 4.0 licence. Each word has one plain meaning and, where it helps, an example sentence. A word with a note number is defined from that source; a word without one is our own working wording, written with the help of Claude, an AI assistant.

How to report what you hear

Say **where, what, how strong**: "At second twelve, the man's voice goes metallic, strong." Strength: *slight, clear, strong*. One clip, one note per problem.

Pitch and melody

Prosody is the group name for intonation, stress, rhythm and loudness: the music on top of the sounds ¹.

WORD	WHAT IT MEANS	SAY IT LIKE
Pitch	How high or low the voice sits.	"Pitch too low for a young woman."
Pitch range	How far the voice moves between its high and low notes.	"Narrow range, almost one note."
Intonation	The melody of a sentence: where it rises and falls.	"Questions don't rise at the end."
Monotone	Flat melody, no ups and downs.	"Monotone, sounds like reading."
Sing-song	Melody that goes up and down too much, or always the same way.	"Sing-song, every line ends the same."
Rising end	Pitch goes up at the end, as in a question; on a statement it is <i>uptalk</i> ² .	"Every line rises, sounds unsure."
Loudness	How loud a sound feels ³ .	"Too quiet at the end of lines."

Tone: the colour of the voice

Tone (also *timbre*) is what makes two voices differ on the same note.

How the vocal folds make sound is *phonation* ⁴; the everyday one is *modal voice* ⁵.

WORD	WHAT IT MEANS
Warm	Soft, round, rich in the low part. Pleasant, close.
Bright	Sharp, clear, rich in the high part. Can turn harsh.
Dark	Deep, covered, a bit heavy.
Thin	Little body, sounds small or far away.
Full	Lots of body, sounds big and close.
Nasal	Too much air through the nose while speaking.
Breathy	Air leaks with the voice, like a whisper mixed in.
Creaky	Low rattle, like a slow door, often at line ends (also <i>vocal fry</i>).
Hoarse / raspy	Rough, scratchy, like a sore throat or a smoker.
Tense / pressed	Squeezed, strained, as if pushing.
Relaxed	Easy, loose, no effort heard.
Whisper	No vocal-fold buzz at all, only air ⁶ .
Harsh	Squeezed throat, rough and strained; also <i>pressed</i> ⁷ .
Falsetto	The register just above the normal voice, thin and high ⁸ .
Formants	The resonances of the mouth and throat; they make an <i>a</i> sound like an <i>a</i> ⁹ .

Rhythm and timing

WORD	WHAT IT MEANS	SAY IT LIKE
Rhythm	The beat of speech: how long and short parts follow each other.	"Rhythm is even, like a robot."

WORD	WHAT IT MEANS	SAY IT LIKE
Pace	How fast someone speaks.	"Pace too fast, words run together."
Pause	A silence inside or between sentences.	"Pause in the wrong place, mid-word."
Stress	The part of a word said louder or longer (<i>CA</i> sa, not <i>ca</i> SA) ¹⁰ .	"Stress on the wrong syllable."
Flow	Speech moves on without stumbling.	"Flow breaks, it hesitates."
Choppy	Cut into small pieces, no flow.	"Choppy, like words glued together."
Drawl	Sounds pulled long and slow.	"Vowels drawled, very southern."
Clipped	Sounds cut short and quick.	"Clipped endings, swallowed vowels."
Disfluency	A break in fluent speech: false starts, repeats, "ehm" ¹¹ .	"Lots of false starts."
Filler	A sound or word ("ehm", "cioè") that holds the turn while thinking ¹² .	"No fillers, too clean."
Speaking vs articulation rate	Speed with the pauses counted, and without them ¹³ .	"Talks fast but pauses a lot."

Conversation

WORD	WHAT IT MEANS	SAY IT LIKE
Turn	One person's go at speaking.	"Its turns are too long."
Gap	Silence between one person stopping and the other starting.	"Gap too long, feels slow."
Overlap	Both speak at the same time.	"Overlap at the end of my line."
Interruption	One cuts in before the other has finished.	"It interrupts me mid-sentence."
Barge-in	I cut in and the system should stop and listen.	"Barge-in fails, it keeps talking."
Backchannel	Small listening sounds: <i>mhm</i> , <i>sì</i> , <i>ah</i> .	"No backchannel, feels cold."
Talking over	Keeps speaking through the other person.	"It talks over me."
Turn-taking	Speaking one at a time, in turns ¹⁴ .	"Turn-taking feels natural."
IPU	A stretch of speech with at least 0.2 s of silence each side; Moshi measures pauses, gaps and overlaps with it ¹⁵ .	—

Accent and pronunciation

WORD	WHAT IT MEANS	SAY IT LIKE
Accent	The way a place or group colours speech: melody, vowels, rhythm.	"Neapolitan melody, but northern vowels."
Pronunciation	How a word's sounds are made.	" <i>Gli</i> sounds like <i>li</i> ."
Vowel colour	Whether a vowel is open or closed (<i>è</i> vs <i>é</i>).	"Open <i>e</i> where Rome says closed."
Double consonants	Held consonants in Italian (<i>fatto</i> , not <i>fato</i>).	"Doubles missing, sounds foreign."
Mumbled	Sounds not finished, mouth barely moves.	"Mumbled ending."
Slurred	Sounds melt into each other, like drunk.	"Slurred, hard to follow."
Foreign tinge	Sounds like a non-Italian speaking Italian.	"Slight English tinge on the <i>r</i> ."
Articulation	How the tongue, lips and palate shape each sound ¹⁶ .	"Sloppy articulation."
Intelligibility	How easy the speech is to understand ¹⁷ .	"Hard to understand in the noise."
Coarticulation	A sound changing to be more like its neighbour ¹⁸ .	—
Elision	A sound or syllable left out (' <i>sto</i> for <i>questo</i>) ¹⁹ .	"Too much elision, sounds lazy."
Code-switching	Changing language or dialect inside a conversation ²⁰ .	"Switches to English mid-sentence."

Feeling and delivery

WORD	WHAT IT MEANS
Expressive	Feeling comes through: happy, tired, annoyed.
Flat	No feeling, neutral to the point of dead.
Energy	How awake and pushed the voice is.
Emphasis	Some words pushed to carry meaning.
Read, not spoken	Sounds like reading a text, not talking.
Natural	Could pass for a real person in a real moment.

WORD	WHAT IT MEANS
Paralanguage	What the voice adds beyond the words: pitch, volume, tone, feeling ²¹ .
Laughter	Rhythmic breath bursts, usually heard as joy or relief ²² ; real talk has laughs, sighs and coughs.

Noises from the recording

WORD	WHAT IT SOUNDS LIKE
Background noise	Anything behind the voice: street, TV, people.
Hiss	Steady <i>ssss</i> , like air or old tape.
Hum / buzz	Steady low tone, like a fridge or a bad cable.
Echo	Clear repeats of the voice, like a big empty hall.
Room sound	Voice bounces off walls, sounds like a bathroom (also <i>reverb</i>).
Muffled	Like talking through a blanket; the highs are gone.
Tinny	Like a cheap speaker or a tin can; the lows are gone.
Phone sound	Narrow, boxy, like an old phone line.
Clipping	Too loud, cracks and distorts on loud parts.
Pops	Bursts of air on <i>p</i> and <i>b</i> .
Mouth noise	Lip smacks, tongue clicks, wet sounds.
Breaths	Audible in-breaths. Some are natural; too many is not.
Pumping	Background rises and drops as the voice starts and stops.

Noises made by the AI voice

WORD	WHAT IT SOUNDS LIKE
Metallic / robotic	Buzzy, ringing, like a voice through a metal pipe.
Warble	Wobbly, bubbly, like underwater.
Glitch	A short jump, stutter or broken bit.
Cut-off	Word or sentence stops before the end.
Click	A tiny tick or snap where pieces join.
Drift	The voice slowly turns into another person.
Accent drift	The accent fades or changes during the clip.
Babble	Speech-like sounds with no real words.
Wrong words	Says something not in the text, skips or repeats words.
Wrong speed	Sounds sped up or slowed down, chipmunk or sleepy.
Silence holes	Unexpected dead air inside speech.
Repetition	The same word or phrase over and over.
Wrong language	The recogniser hears another language.
Low naturalness	A program rates the clip as unnatural.
Compression artifact	Damage left by squeezing audio too hard ²³ .

Words used to test the model

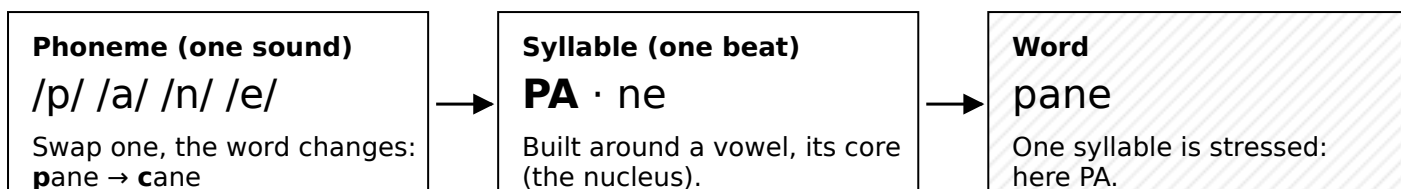
WORD	WHAT IT MEANS
Full-duplex	Both sides can talk at once, like a phone call ²⁴ ; Moshi listens while it speaks ²⁵ .
Half-duplex	Turn by turn: these systems "do not listen while speaking" ²⁶ .
Latency	Seconds from the end of the user's speech to the start of the answer ²⁷ .
Takeover (TOR)	The model takes the turn instead of staying quiet or backchannelling ²⁸ .
Pause handling	Not jumping in when the user only pauses ²⁹ .
Smooth turn-taking	Answering promptly when the user ends, without long delay or overlap ³⁰ .
User interruption	The user cuts in; the model should notice and adapt ³¹ .

WORD	WHAT IT MEANS
Voice activity detection (VAD)	A program deciding when someone is speaking ³² .
Voice prompt	A short speech sample that tells PersonaPlex which voice to use ³³ .
Text prompt (role)	Text that tells PersonaPlex its role and scenario ³⁴ .
Inner monologue	Moshi writes the text of its own words just before saying them ³⁵ .
Codec	A program that squeezes audio into a few numbers and back ³⁶ ; Moshi's is Mimi.
MOS	Mean opinion score: the average of people's quality ratings ³⁷ .
WER (wrong words)	Share of words wrong; 0 means identical ³⁸ .
Voice match	How sure a program is that two clips are the same person ³⁹ .
Emotion recognition	A program naming the feeling in a voice, face or text ⁴⁰ .

Sounds and words: the basics

- A **phoneme** is the smallest sound that tells one word from another, written between slashes ⁴¹.
- A **vowel** is said with the mouth open and little or no blocking; a **consonant** closes the way fully or in part ⁴², ⁴³.
- A **syllable** is built around a nucleus, most often a vowel ⁴⁴. **Stress** is the extra weight on one syllable: louder, longer, or a change of pitch ⁴⁵.
- A consonant is described by **voice** (do the vocal folds vibrate) ⁴⁶, **place** (where the narrowing is) ⁴⁷ and **manner** (how the air passes) ⁴⁸.
- The manners: **stop** blocks the air completely ⁴⁹; **fricative** forces it through a narrow gap ⁵⁰; **affricate** starts as a stop and ends as a fricative ⁵¹; **nasal** lets the air out through the nose ⁵²; **liquid** covers the l- and r-sounds ⁵³.
- A **double consonant** (gemination) is a consonant held longer ⁵⁴; in Italian *fato* and *fatto* are two words ⁵⁵. A **diphthong** is two vowel sounds in one syllable; split across two syllables they are a hiatus ⁵⁶. Italian *ai* and *au* are common ⁵⁷.
- The places of the Italian consonants follow the table of Italian phonology: lips, teeth and gum ridge, palate, soft palate ⁵⁸.

1 · Sound → syllable → word



2 · The two kinds of sound

Vowel Air flows out freely, the mouth stays open. Usually voiced (the vocal folds buzz). Italian writes 5: a e i o u but says 7: e and o can be open or closed.	Consonant Air is stopped or squeezed somewhere in the mouth or throat. Every consonant gets three labels: voice, place and manner (box 3).
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3 · The three labels of a consonant

Voice: do the vocal folds buzz?
Hand on the throat. Voiceless → voiced: **p→b t→d f→v c(asa)→g(atto)**

Place: where the air is stopped or squeezed

front of the mouth		back of the mouth →	
Lips p b m f v	Teeth / gum ridge t d n s l r z(io)	Palate ci gi sc gn gli	Soft palate (back) c(asa) g(atto)

Manner: how the air gets out

Stop (plosive): blocked, then released p b t d c(asa) g(atto)
Fricative: squeezed, a hiss f v s sc(ena)
Affricate: a stop that ends in a hiss z(io) c(iao) g(elo)
Nasal: air out through the nose · **Liquid**: l- and r-sounds m n gn · l r gli

4 · Three more things that matter in Italian

Stress One syllable said stronger, longer or higher. CAsa · citTÀ	Double consonant The consonant is held longer, and the word changes: fato ≠ fatto (gemination)	Diphthong Two vowels inside one syllable, gliding: pau · sa (two syllables apart = hiatus)
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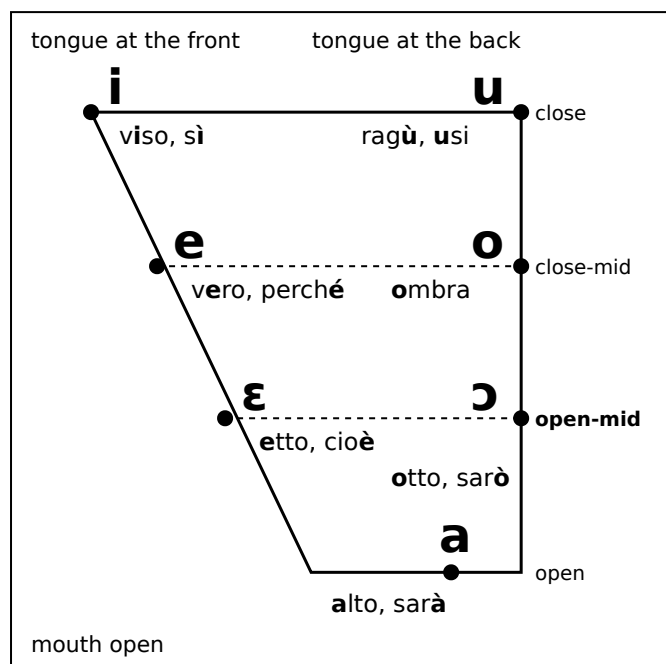
The phonetic alphabet (IPA) for Italian

- The **IPA** (International Phonetic Alphabet) is one standard set of symbols for the sounds of speech, used in every language ⁵⁹.
- There is no separate alphabet for Italian.** Italian uses a part of the same IPA; Wikipedia's Italian key lists the symbols, the example words and the marks shown above ⁶⁰.
- One Italian linguist, Luciano Canepari, built an extended version called **canIPA**, for finer detail; it has seen little use outside his own work ⁶¹.
- Italian has **seven vowels** in stressed syllables; the open *e o* appear only there, the closed *e o* elsewhere ⁶². Palermo pronounces them all open and parts of Piedmont in between, so this is where accents show ⁶³.
- The letters *s* and *z* each hide two sounds: *s* is [s] or [z], *z* is [ts] or [dz] ⁶⁴.

// slashes: the sound as a unit of the language (phoneme) /'fatto/

[] brackets: the sound as actually said, with detail ['fatto]

Vowels: 7 sounds from 5 letters



What to listen for

e and **o** each have two sounds:
closed **e** **o** and open **ɛ** **ɔ**.

The open ones appear only in the stressed syllable:

coperto [ko'pɛrto]

quota ['kwɔ:tə]

Everywhere else **e** and **o** are closed:

amore [a'mo:re]

Same letters, different sound:

otto ['ɔtto]: open first **o**, closed last **o**

Accents differ here: Palermo makes them all open, parts of Piedmont put them in between.

Consonants whose symbol is not the letter

The others (p b t d f v m n l r s) are written as in Italian.

ʎ gli figli, maglia	ɲ gn gnocco, ogni	ʃ sc(e), sci scena, pesci	ŋ n before c/g anche, unghia
tʃ c(e), ci ciao, certo	dʒ g(e), gi gelo, giù	ts z zio, marzo	dz z, too zaino, mezzo
k c, ch, q cosa, finché	ɡ g, gh gatto, ghetto	j i before a vowel ieri, più	w u before a vowel uova, qui
s / z the letter s has two sounds sano [s] · sbirro [z]		r a rolled (trilled) r Roma, morte	

Marks

' stress comes next: amore [a'mo:re]

ː long vowel: primo ['pri:mo]

tt double symbol = double consonant: fatto ['fatto]

· syllable break: continuo [kon'ti:nu.o]

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