

Lesson 12:

Diphthongs

Objectives: This lesson tends to help learners distinguish between pure vowels (fixed reference points), and gliding vowels which involve a movement from one position to another in the mouth.

1. Definition

Pure vowels are usually defined with reference to fixed points of articulation, i.e. the part of the tongue involved in the production of vowels, the distance between that part and the roof of the mouth, and the duration of vowel production (whether short or long).

On the other hand, another type of vowels need some “detectable change” in quality. They are called “**gliding vowels**”. Crystal (2008) notes that “if two auditory elements are involved, the vowel glide is referred to as a diphthong” (p. 517). If three elements are involved, we call the sound as triphthong.

A diphthong is, thus, a complex sound consisting of two vowel elements pronounced so as to form a single syllable. In the pronunciation of a diphthong the organs of speech start in the position of one vowel and glide gradually in the direction of another vowel. The first part of the diphthong is much longer and stronger than the second part.

When we describe diphthongs, we usually mention the beginning and the ends of the glide. In other words, we mention the starting point from which of the tongue moves, and the point to which it has reached. For example, the production of the diphthong /eɪ/ involves a glide from front mid position to a front close position.

2. English Diphthongs

As far as the Received Pronunciation is concerned, we can identify eight diphthongs (Jones, 1956). These include: /eɪ/ /aɪ/ /ɔɪ/ /aʊ/ /əʊ/ /ɪə/ /eə/ /ʊə/

They can be classified into two groups: closing, and centring diphthongs (see fig 1). The first group (/eɪ/ /aɪ/ /ɔɪ/ /aʊ/ /əʊ/) involves a glide to the front/back close position (see fig 2). However, the second group (/ɪə/ /eə/ /ʊə/) involves a glide to the centre position (see fig 5).



Fig. 1 English diphthongs

2.1. Closing Diphthongs

The closing diphthongs have the characteristic that they all end with a glide towards a closer vowel. Because the second part of the diphthong is weak, they often do not reach a position that could be called close (Roach, P., 2009).

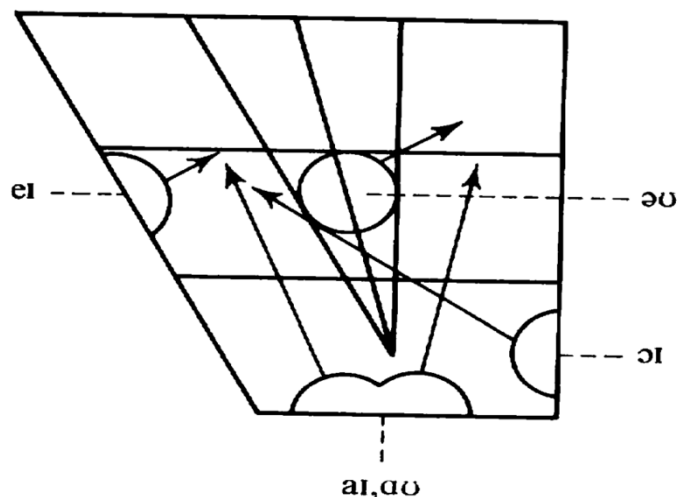


Fig. 2 Closing diphthongs, Gimson, 1980

2.1.1. Front Closing Diphthongs: Three of the diphthongs glide towards /ɪ/ (front closing diphthongs), as described below:

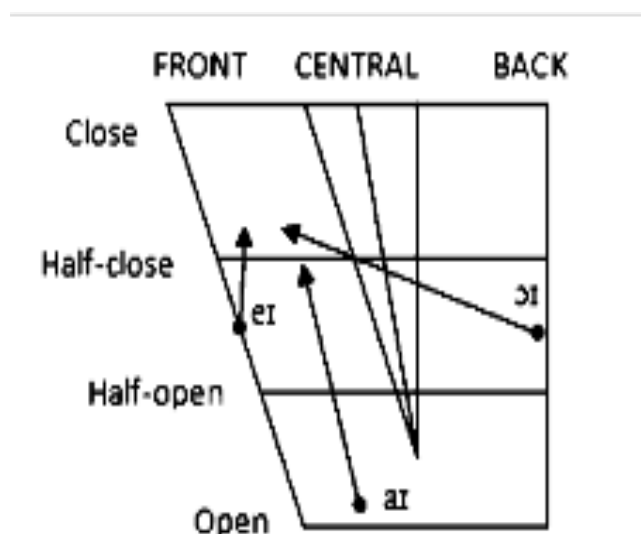


Fig. 3 Front closing diphthongs

/eɪ/ The starting point is the same as the /e/ of 'get', 'men', (example words: 'paid', 'pain', 'face')

/aɪ/ This diphthong begins with an open vowel which is between front and back; it is quite similar to the /ʌ/ of the words 'cut', 'bun', (example words: 'tide', 'time', 'nice')

/ɔɪ/ The first part of this diphthong is slightly more open than /ɔ:/ in 'ought', 'born'. (example words: 'void', 'loin', 'voice')

2.1.2. Back Closing Diphthongs

Two diphthongs glide towards /ʊ/, so that as the tongue moves closer to the roof of the mouth there is at the same time a rounding movement of the lips.

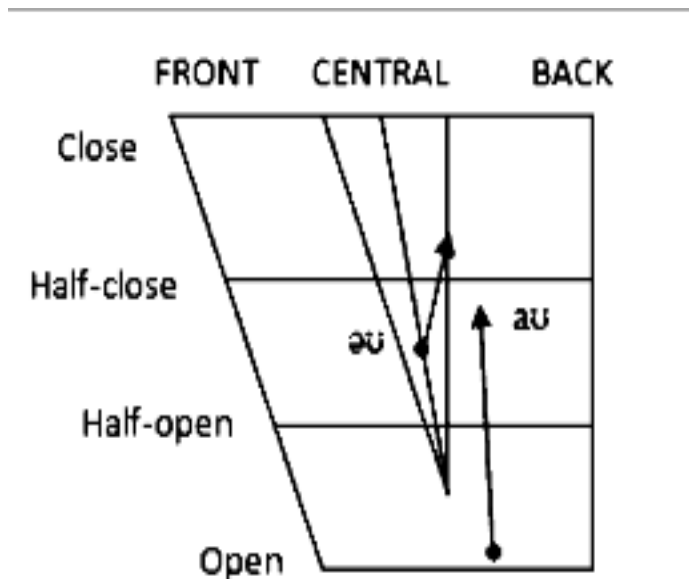


Fig. 4 Back closing diphthongs

/əʊ/ The vowel position for the beginning of this is the same as for the "schwa" vowel /ə/. The lips may be slightly rounded in anticipation of the glide towards /ʊ/. (example words: 'load', 'home', 'most')

/aʊ/ This diphthong begins with a vowel similar to /ɑ:/ but a little more front. Since this is an open vowel, a glide to /ʊ/ would necessitate a large movement, and the tongue often does not reach the /ʊ/ position. There is only slight lip-rounding. (example words: 'loud', 'gown', 'house')

2.2. Centring Diphthongs

The centring diphthongs glide towards the (schwa) vowel, as the symbols indicate.

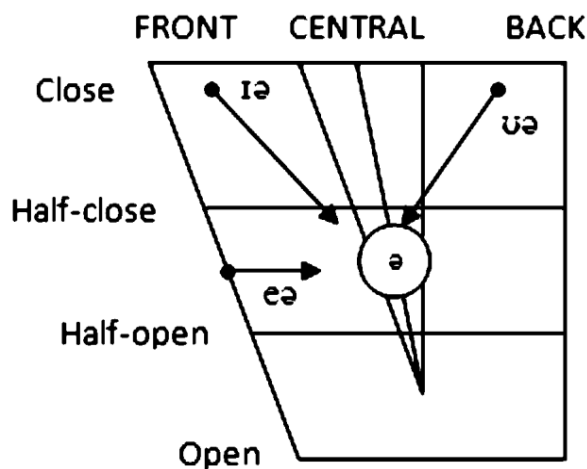


Fig. 5 Centring diphthongs

/ɪə/ The starting point is a little closer than /ɪ/ in 'bit', 'bin', (example words: 'beard', 'weird', 'fierce')

/eə/ This diphthong begins with a vowel sound that is the same as the /e/ of 'get', 'men'. (example words: 'aired', 'cairn', 'scarce')

/ʊə/ For speakers who have this diphthong, this has a starting point similar to /ʊ/ in 'put', 'pull'. (example words: 'moored', 'tour', 'lure'). Many speakers pronounce instead.

References

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- Gimson, A, C. (1980). *An introduction to the pronunciation of English*. (3rd ed). London: Edward (Publishers) Arnold Limited.
- Jones, D. (1956). *The pronunciation of English*. (4th ed). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
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