

English Triphthongs

Objectives: The main aim of this lesson is to explain that change in the quality during the articulation of vowels, results in change in type of vowels.

1. Definition

As we have mentioned previously, the difference between pure vowels, diphthongs, and triphthongs lies in the extent, to which we can notice a change in the quality during their articulation. When no noticeable change is perceived, the sound is termed as pure vowel (monophthong) such as /e/. If there is evident change in quality, one thinks of gliding vowel. If two auditory elements are involved, the sound is referred to as a diphthong /eɪ/; however if three elements are involved resulting in two glides, we call the sound a triphthong /eɪə/.

So, a triphthong is a glide from one vowel to another and then to a third, all produced rapidly and without interruption (Roach, P. 1991). For example, a careful pronunciation of the word 'flower' /flaʊə/ begins with a vowel quality similar to /ɑ:/, goes on to a glide towards the back close rounded area (for which we use the symbol /ʊ/), then ends with a mid-central vowel (schwa).

2. Triphthong Symbols: (eɪə aɪə ɔɪə aʊə əʊə)

The triphthongs can be looked on as being composed of the five closing diphthongs described in the last section, with /ə/ on the end. Thus we get:

/aɪə/: Liar /laɪə/, wire /waɪə/, fire /faɪə/, hire /haɪə/, dryer /draɪə/

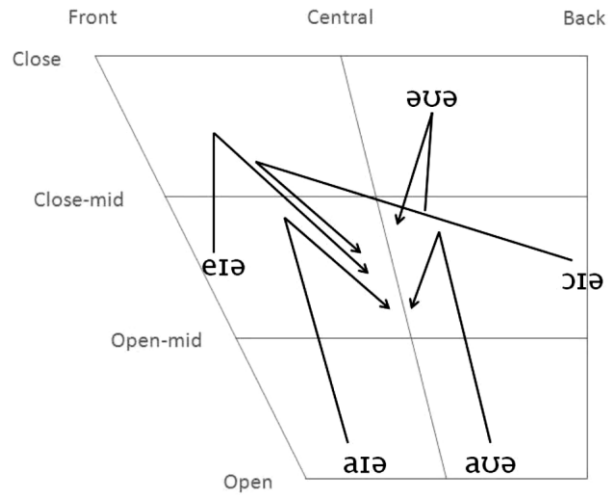
/eɪə/: Player /pleɪə/, layer /leɪə/, sprayer /spreɪə/, prayer /preɪə/

/ɔɪə/: royal /rɔɪə/, lawyer /lɔɪə/, loyal /lɔɪə/, employer /ɪmˈplɔɪə/

/aʊə/: hour /aʊə/, flower /flaʊə/, shower /ʃaʊə/, coward /kaʊəd/

/əʊə/: lower /ləʊə/, slower /sləʊə/, knower /nəʊə/

Unlike diphthongs, triphthongs are not analysed as separate vowel phonemes. They are interpreted as closing diphthongs followed by a schwa. The word *royal*, then, consists of four phonemes: /r/, /ɔɪ/, /ə/ and /l/. (SKandera, P. & Berleight, P. 2005).



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References

Roach, P. (1991), *English Phonetics and Phonology : A practical course*. 2nd ed. Cambridge University Press.

SKandera, P. & Berleigh, P. (2005). *A Manual of English Phonetics and Phonology*. Gunter Narr Verlag Tübingen