

Chapter Six: English Diphthongs and Triphthongs

The English language uses a second category of vowel sounds that are other than constant. This category bears the name of **diphthongs**. A diphthong, quite dissimilar from pure vowel or monophthong, is produced with a perceptibly noticeable change in vowel quality. This remarkable change in quality happens solely because diphthongs are compound vowels: they are made up of two vowels blended together. The diphthongs' beginnings and endings are glaringly dissimilar sounds. The following discussion will dwell extensively on these compound sounds.

6.1. Some Key Features Common to All English Diphthongs

Diphthongs constitute a big proportion of the vowel inventory of English. They are vowel sounds in the production of which there is a glide, a slight and smooth movement from one vowel quality to another (Gimson, 1970: 126). They are, in a sense, analogous to compound words as they are made up of two phonological units each of which can exist independently of the other. The constituent elements are qualitatively as well as quantitatively different from each other. Roach (2009), Ladefoged (2001) maintain that the most salient feature of all English diphthongs which should be borne in mind and paid due attention to by foreigners is the prominence of the first element. That is, the first element is much more noticeable, hence far more easily recognised by the listener's perceptual mechanism than the second. There exist two main factors contributing to this trait; first, loudness in the sense that the 1st element is remarkably louder than the second. Second, length (duration), the second element is noticeably longer than the first. Perhaps the very label *falling* that Gimson (1970) uses gives sufficient allusion about these features. Besides this feature, Gimson (1970) enumerates a set of other features common to all diphthongs. They are summarised as follows:

They have the same length as long pure vowels do. Likewise, they undergo the same quantitative changes long vowels do. Perhaps the discussion calls for a bit of a background: knowledge

pertaining to English contoids (a term coined by the American phonetician Pike (1943) to be used exclusively in lieu of consonants when the latter are looked at as units of phonetics). As is well known, one of the phonetic traits of English fortis consonants (discussed earlier in this chapter) is that when they close a syllable the peak of which is a long vowel or a diphthong, the length of the latter is noticeably reduced. By contrast, if a syllable is closed by a lenis consonant, the length of the vowel that precedes it is not interfered with.

No diphthong occurs in a syllable closed by the voiced velar nasal /N/ unless the velar nasal /N/ assimilates (becomes similar in quality) to /n/ in connected speech. It is wise to point out that the first trait is phonetic whilst the second is phonological as it concerns the phonotactics of English diphthongs.

Owing to their importance which, we assume, emanates from their big number coupled with their frequency of occurrence, English diphthongs have received a great deal of attention in both books of phonetics and pronunciation teaching. Lewis (1977: 14) seems to be at odds, at least partly, with Gimson, Roach, and O'Connor. He assumes that English diphthongs are inherently long 'diphthongs may be taken to be of the same inherent length as the unchecked vowels'. Unchecked vowels being vowels that figure in accented syllables. Although he concedes that English diphthongs' length behaves differently in different phonological environments, he holds that no matter what the extent of the variations is, diphthongs never lose their prominence. Additionally, he holds that as regards length, diphthongs along with long monophthongs can be compartmentalised into six categories: 'normal, very clipped or ultra clipped; long, very long or extra long.' (ibid.17)

6.2. Classes of Diphthongs

Diphthongs fall into two main classes depending on what constitutes the end point: centring diphthongs and closing diphthongs.

A **centring diphthong** is a diphthong that glides towards the mid central vowel, schwa. English has three centring diphthongs. They appear respectively in the following monosyllabic words: *bear*, *here* and *sure*.

A **closing diphthong** bears this name because it glides towards a close vowel. Within this category there are two sub-categories: closing diphthongs that glide towards the close front vowel /I/ and closing diphthongs which glide towards the close back vowel /U/. Now that we have looked at some of the key characteristics of English diphthongs, we will turn our attention to describing each one individually. The discussion will predominantly revolve around how articulatory phonetics deals with them.

6.3. The Description of English Diphthongs

We have opted for the descriptive framework and analytic accounts used by Gimson (1970). Our choice fell on this because it is, in our view, much more exhaustive than all the ones provided by other books of phonetics of which we managed to get hold. However, this does not preclude the inclusion of some bits of insights from other authors, which we believed would make the discussion a bit richer. Hence, unless otherwise indicated, all the descriptions are those delineated by Gimson (1970:126-46). The upcoming discussion will address each diphthong in turn. It is initiated by providing example wherein the diphthong in question figures. It goes on to provide a full description of the diphthong. The discussion ends by considering some recommendations to foreign learners. Please note that, due to space constraints, we have not reproduced Gimson's discussion in toto. We have not reproduced the cardinal vowel quadrilateral, diphthongs' variants, along with chief sources.

/ei/

Examples. *_a_ape*, late, make, lady, waste, bass *ai*, *ay_day*, may, waist, rail, aim, rain *ei*,
ey_eight, veil, weigh, rein, they, whey *ea_great*, steak, break

Description

The starting point is the half close front vowel /e/. Then, the glide goes in the direction of the close front vowel /ɪ/. The lips are spread.

/aɪ/

Examples. *_i, y_time, write, bite, climb, cry, dry, bye* *igh, eigh_high, light, fight, might, height*

ie, ye_die, lie, pie, tried, dye *ei, ai_either, eider, aisle*

Description

The first element is the front vowel /a/. It then glides in the direction of the close front vowel /ɪ/. The lips turn from a neutral to a loosely spread position. As will almost all the other monophthongs and diphthongs, he underlines the importance of abiding by the rules pertaining to length reduction as well as prominence

/ɔɪ/

Examples. *_oi, oy_boy, toy, noise, voice, boil, point*

Description

The glide begins at the half open back vowel /O/. Then, the tongue moves in the direction of the close front vowel /ɪ/. The lips are open and rounded for the first element, becoming slightly spread towards the end of the glide.

/əʊ/

Examples. *_o_so, old, home, both, folk*

oa_oak, road, foal, toast, soap *oe_toe, doe, sloe, foe, hoe*

ou, ow_soul, though, shoulder, know, blow

Description

The starting point is the half open front vowel /e/. Then, the tongue glides towards the close back vowel /ʊ/. The lips are neutral for the first element; they are rounded in the second.

/aʊ/

Examples. _ou, ow_house, sound, out, cow, town, allow

Description

The glide for /aʊ/ starts at the open back vowel /a/. Then, it moves towards the close back /ʊ/. As regards lips' configuration, they are neutral at the beginning, and then they turn slightly rounded as the glide moves towards the second element.

/ɪə/

Examples: _eer, ear, ere_deer, dear, tear, (drop of liquid), here eir, ier, ir_weird, fierce, fakin

ea, ia, eu, eo_idea, Ian, museum, theological

Description

The starting point of /ɪə/ is the front close vowel /ɪ/ and the end point is a more open variety of schwa /ə/. As regards the lips' configuration, they are neutral throughout. It was pointed out by Daniel Jones (1962) that this diphthong does not always have the same traits as the other diphthongs: it is not always falling. In other words, in stressed syllables it is the second element rather than the first which tends to be prominent. As such, Gimson suggested that /ɪə/ be exceptionally called a rising diphthong.

/eə/

Example: *_are_* care, rare, share, mare

air_ air, fair, pair, chair

ear_ bear, pear, wear, tear (v.)

Description

The first element of this vowel glide is the half open front vowel /e/. The glide then moves in the direction of the mid central vowel /ə/. The lips tend to be neutral throughout the production of this sound.

/ʊə/

Examples: *_oor_* poor, moor

ure_ pure, endure, cure, sure *ur_* curious, spurious, during, security

ewer_ sewer *our_* tour, dour, gourd

Description

The starting point is the close back vowel /ʊ/. The glide then moves in the direction of the mid central vowel schwa /ə/. The lips are slightly rounded at the beginning of the glide and then they become neutrally spread.

BBC Accent's Diphthongs

Diphthong	Example words
er	say, way, great

aɪ	buy, night, why
ɔɪ	boy, avoid, moil
ɪə	here, beer, year
eə	air, snare, heir
ʊə	poor, sure
əʊ	go, snow, woeful
aʊ	cow, foul, fowl

As we have alluded to earlier, the vocalic inventory of English is much richer and more diversifies than the consonantal one. We have heretofore looked at two main classes of sounds, monophthongs, or as they are alternatively labelled pure vowels and diphthongs. English exploits yet a third set of sounds called in phonetic terms triphthongs.

6.4. English Triphthongs

As the name might suggest, a triphthong is simply a vowel sound made by the production of three successive vowels of different types. (Crystal: 1980) English uses five triphthongs: they are simply the closing diphthongs, the diphthongs gliding towards a close vowel, attached to the schwa vowel. (Roach: 2009) So long as both the diphthongs and the schwa vowel have been looked at above, we will confine ourselves, for the sake of warding off redundancy, to giving solely example words where the targeted sounds figure:

/eɪə/ as in: layer; eɪə / eɪə/ as in: hire; /aʊ ə/ as in: hour, our; /əʊə/ as in: lower; /ɔɪə/ as in: lawyer.

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