

Vowel glides: Diphthongs and Triphthongs

1- Diphthongs

1-1-Definition

Diphthongs are sounds which are produced as a result of a movement or glide from one vowel to another such as /eɪ/ in 'late'. In other words, a diphthong is a sound made of two elements or vowels. The first element, /e/ called the starting point, is the vowel with which we start. The second element or glide /ɪ/ is the orientation to which we end.

1-2- Description of diphthongs

Diphthongs are equivalent in length to pure long vowels. The first part of the diphthong is much longer and stronger than the second part. For example, most of the diphthong /eɪ/ consists of the vowel /e/ and only about the last quarter of the diphthong does the vowel /ɪ/ become noticeable. As the glide to /ɪ/ happens, the loudness of the sound decreases.

1-3- Categories of diphthongs

In British English, there are eight diphthongs that can be categorised according to the second element or glide of the diphthong.

II-3-a- Centring diphthongs are those sounds where the glide is made toward the central vowel /ə/. In this category, we find three diphthongs:

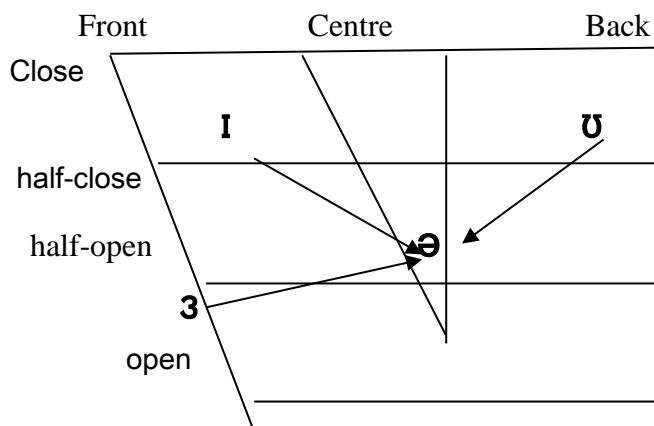


Figure 10: Diphthongs having /ə/ as a second element

- /ɪə/ : This diphthong typically occurs in words like: 'dear', 'tear', 'here', 'beer', 'idea'.
- /ʊə/ : It occurs in words having such spellings as: 'poor', 'sure', 'curious', 'during', 'tour'.

- / **ɛə** / : With this sound, the lips are neutrally open throughout. It is heard in words with such spellings as: ‘care’, ‘rare’, ‘share’, ‘air’, ‘pair’, ‘fair’, ‘hair’.

II-3-b- Closing diphthongs: are those sounds where the glide is made toward the closing vowel /**ɪ**/ or /**ʊ**/. In this respect, there are three diphthongs ending in /**ɪ**/ and two others ending in /**ʊ**/.

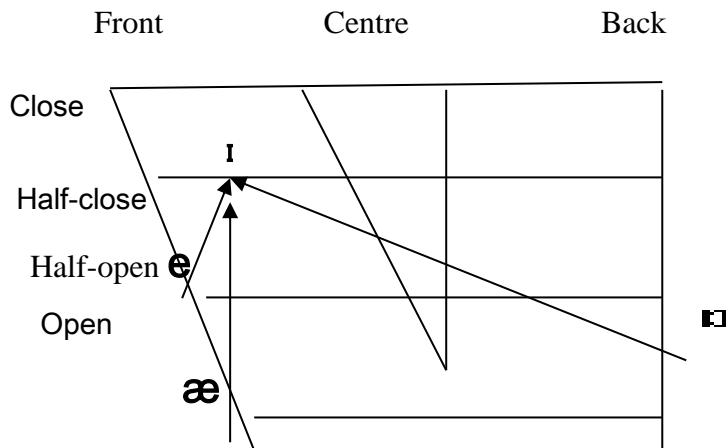


Figure 11: Diphthongs having /**ɪ**/ as a second element

- / **eɪ** / : It is found in words having such spellings as: ‘late’, ‘make’, ‘lady’, ‘rail’, ‘day’, ‘eight’, ‘they’, ‘great’, ‘break’.
- / **aɪ** / : This diphthong can be heard in words like: ‘time’, ‘try’, ‘cry’, ‘fight’, ‘light’, ‘lie’, ‘die’, etc.
- / **ɔɪ** / : Examples of words’ spelling for this sound are ‘boil’, ‘noise’, ‘toy’, ‘boy’.

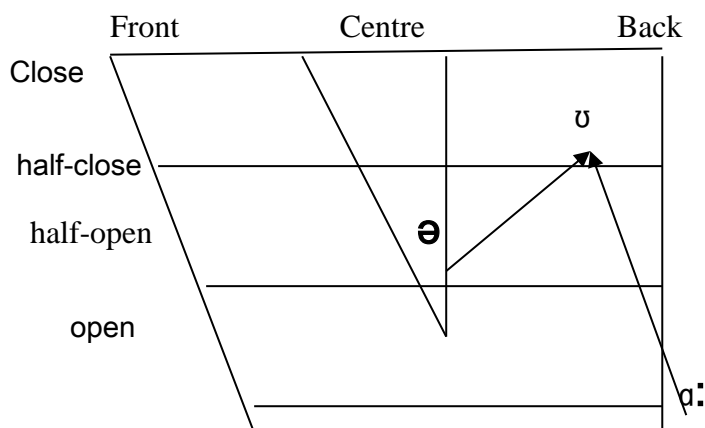


Figure 12: Diphthongs having /ʊ/ as a second element

- /əʊ/ : It is found in words having spellings like: ‘both’, ‘home’, ‘old’, ‘so’, ‘soap’, ‘soul’, ‘shoulder’, ‘know’, ‘low’, etc.
- /aʊ/ : It appears in words like: ‘out’, ‘house’, ‘town’, ‘brown’, ‘cow’, ‘allow’, etc.

2. Triphthongs

A triphthong is glide from one vowel to another and then to a third vowel, all produced rapidly and without interruption. The English triphthongs are made of the five closing diphthongs with the ‘schwa’ /ə/ added at the end of each one. Thus, we get:

- /eɪ/ + /ə/ → /eɪə/ such as in: ‘player’.
- /aɪ/ + /ə/ → /aɪə/ such as in: ‘liar’, ‘fire’
- /ɔɪ/ + /ə/ → /ɔɪə/ such as in: ‘loyal’
- /əʊ/ + /ə/ → /əʊə/ such as in: ‘lower’
- /aʊ/ + /ə/ → /aʊə/ such as in: ‘power’, ‘hour’

Exercise: Transcribe phonetically these words.

a. decide, amount, decay, pronounce, employ, sane, compare, classmate

b. mower, desire, royal, flower, layer, giant, destroyer