



Department of Culture and Communication
Institutionen för kultur och kommunikation (IKK)
ENGLISH

*The Vowels &
Consonants of English*
Lecture Notes

Nigel Musk

The Consonants of English

	Bilabial	Labio-dental	Dental	Alveolar	Palato-alveolar (Post-alveolar)	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Unvoiced (-V) Voiced (+V)	-V +V	-V +V	-V +V	-V +V	-V +V	-V +V	-V +V	-V +V
Stops (Plosives)	p b			t d			k g	ʔ ¹
Fricatives		f v	θ ð	s z	ʃ ʒ			h
Affricates					tʃ dʒ			
Nasals	m			n			ŋ	
Lateral (approximants)				l				
Approximants	w ²			r		j	w ²	

The consonants in the table above are the consonant *phonemes* of RP (Received Pronunciation) and GA (General American), that is, the meaning-distinguishing consonant sounds (c.f. *pat* – *bat*).

Phonemes are written within slashes //, e.g. /t/. Significant variations are explained in the footnotes.

/p/	<i>put, supper, lip</i>	/ʃ/	<i>show, washing, cash</i>
/b/	<i>bit, ruby, pub</i>	/ʒ/	<i>leisure, vision</i>
/t/	<i>two, letter³, cat</i>	/h/	<i>home, ahead</i>
/d/	<i>deep, ladder³, read</i>	/tʃ/	<i>chair, nature, watch</i>
/k/	<i>can, lucky, sick</i>	/dʒ/	<i>jump, pigeon, bridge</i>
/g/	<i>gate, tiger, dog</i>	/m/	<i>man, drummer, comb</i>
/f/	<i>fine, coffee, leaf</i>	/n/	<i>no, runner, pin</i>
/v/	<i>van, over, move</i>	/ŋ/	<i>young, singer</i>
/θ/	<i>think, both</i>	/l/	<i>let⁴, silly, fall</i>
/ð/	<i>the, brother, smooth</i>	/r/	<i>run, carry, (GA car)</i>
/s/	<i>soup, fussy, less</i>	/j/	<i>you, yes</i>
/z/	<i>zoo, busy, use</i>	/w/	<i>woman, way</i>

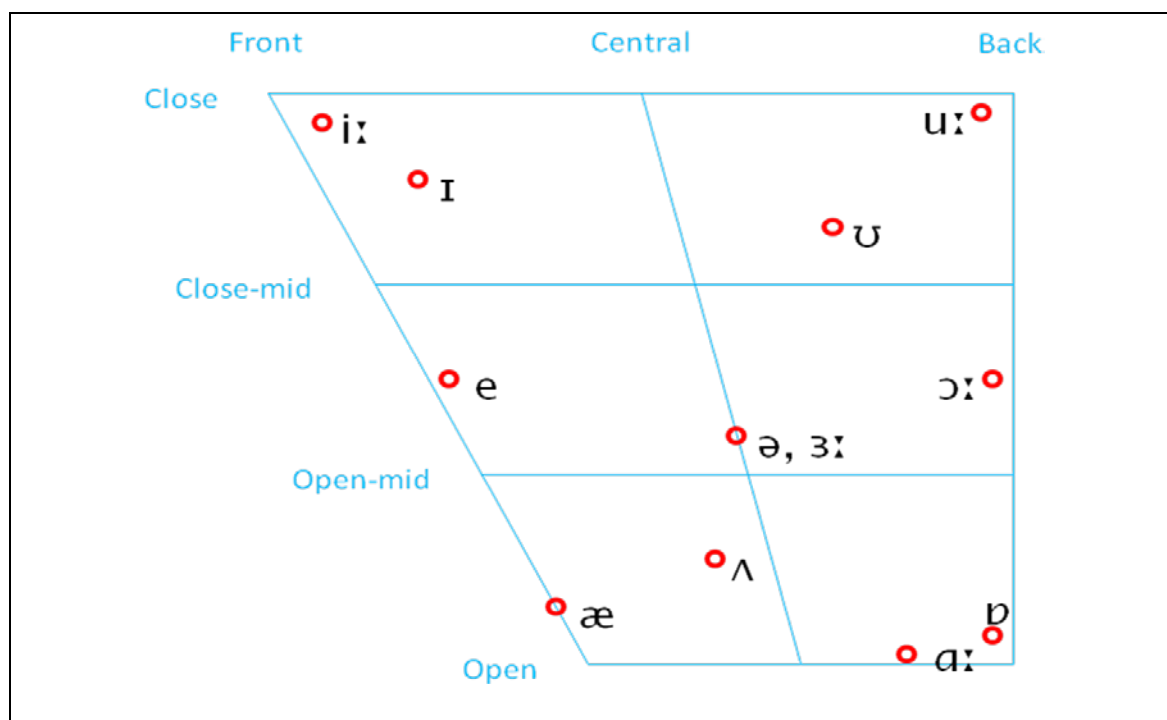
¹ [ʔ] is not regarded as a phoneme of standard English, but it is common in many varieties of British English (including contemporary RP), e.g. *watch* [wɒʔtʃ], since [sɪnʔs], *meet them* ['mi:ʔðəm].

² /w/ is a voiced labio-velar approximant (semi-vowel).

³ In American English 'letter' and 'ladder' may also be pronounced with an alveolar flap [ɾ]: ['lɛrə] ['læɾə]

⁴ In many varieties of British English (including RP) there is a distinction between clear / [l] and dark (velarised) / [ɫ]. Clear / comes before vowels (e.g. 'let' [let], 'silly' ['sɪli]), whereas dark / comes after vowels (e.g. 'milk' [mɪɫk]) or at the end of a word (e.g. 'fall' [fɔ:ɫ]). In American English dark / [ɫ] is used in all positions.

The Vowels of English



The vowels in the table above are the vowel phonemes of RP (Received Pronunciation). All long vowels are followed by colons /:/. Most of the differences between British and American English are to do with the quality and length of the vowels. The most significant differences are explained in the footnotes.

/i:/	<i>eat, sleep</i>	/ʌ/	<i>under, enough, butter</i>
/ɪ/	<i>silly, baby (in final positions⁵)</i>	/ɑ:/	<i>father, calm, can't⁶, car⁷, apart</i>
/ɪ/	<i>it, swim</i>	/ɒ/	<i>odd⁸, want, cough</i>
/e/	<i>edge, lead (=bly), said</i>	/ɔ:/	<i>or⁷, daughter, more</i>
/æ/	<i>apple, man</i>	/ʊ/	<i>put, full</i>
/ɜ:/	<i>earn, bird, occur⁹</i>	/u:/	<i>ooze, shoe, suit</i>
/ə/	<i>above, support, possible, Africa, mother¹⁰</i>		

⁵ In contemporary RP, American English and most southern varieties of British English. In conservative RP and Northern varieties of British English, this is pronounced /ɪ/, as in 'silly': /sɪlɪ/.

⁶ In American English, this is pronounced with the open front vowel /æ/, e.g. before /nt, f, s, θ/, as in: 'can't' /kænt/, 'half' /hæf/, 'grass' /græs/, 'bath' /bæθ/.

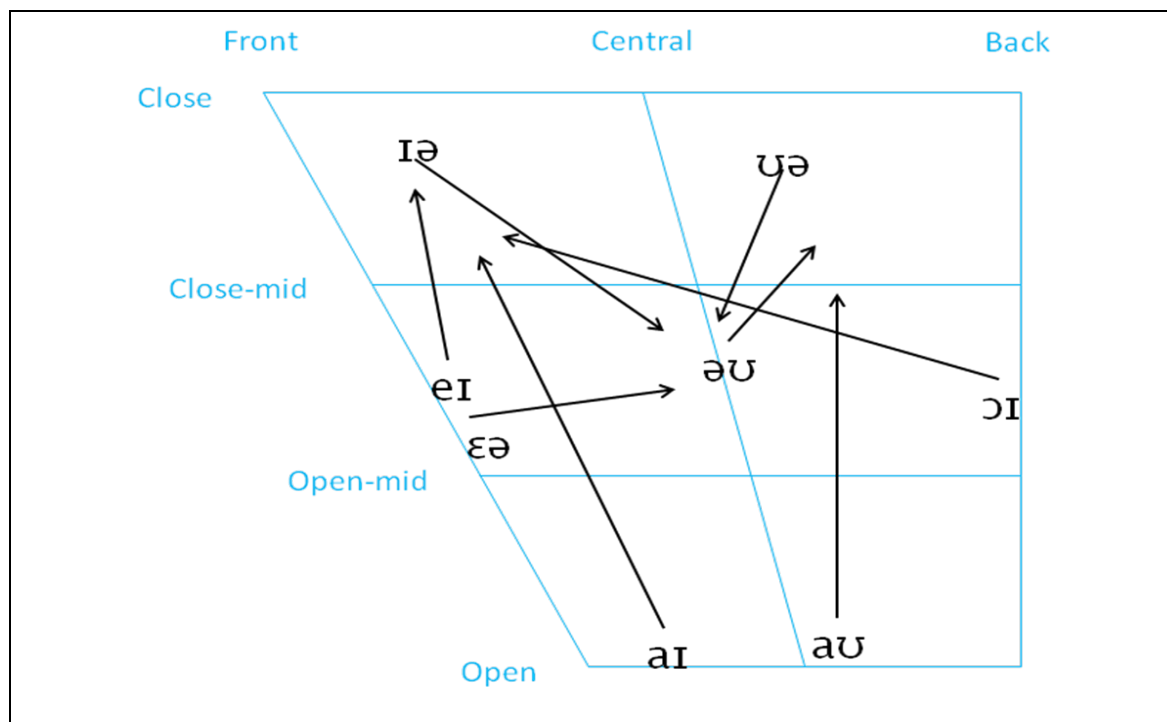
⁷ In RP and many varieties of British English the *r* is not pronounced after a vowel (e.g. 'car' /kɑ:/, 'or' /ɔ:/), but in GA and most American Varieties of English, the *r* after a vowel is pronounced (e.g. 'car' /kɑr/, 'or' /ɔr/).

⁸ This rounded vowel is not found in American English. Instead it is pronounced as an unrounded /ɑ/ (e.g. 'odd' /ɑd/, 'want' /wɑnt/). In some (eastern) varieties of American English it is pronounced as the rounded back mid vowel /ɔ/, e.g. before /ŋ, f, s, θ/, as in 'song' /sɔŋ/, 'cough' /kɔf/, 'loss' /lɔs/, 'cloth' /klɔθ/.

⁹ In GA and most American Varieties of English, this vowel is pronounced with an *r*-coloured vowel: /ɜr/ as in 'earn': /ɜrn/. This can also be written /ɜrn/ in phonemic transcription.

¹⁰ In GA and most American Varieties of English, final *-er* is pronounced with an *r*-coloured vowel: /ər/ as in 'mother': /'mʌðər/. This can also be written /'mʌðər/ in phonemic transcription.

The Diphthongs of English



The table above shows the diphthongs of RP (Received Pronunciation). The arrows show the direction of the glide between two vowels. The most significant differences between British and American English are explained in the footnotes.

/eɪ/	<i>ache, pay</i>	/ɛə/	<i>air¹¹, dare</i>
/aɪ/	<i>I'm, right</i>	/ʊə/	<i>pure¹¹, tour</i>
/ɔɪ/	<i>oil, noise</i>	/aʊ/	<i>out, cow</i>
/ɪə/	<i>ear¹¹, here</i>	/əʊ/	<i>own¹², coat</i>

¹¹ In RP and many varieties of British English the final *r* of the diphthongs /ɪə/, /ɛə/, /ʊə/ is not pronounced, but in GA and most American Varieties of English, the final *r* is typically pronounced with an *r*-coloured vowel:

/ɚ/, e.g. 'ear' /ɪɚ/,
 'air' /ɛɚ/,
 'pure' /pjʊɚ/ or /pjɚ/.

These can also be written /ɪr/, /ɛr/, /pjʊr/ in phonemic transcription. In some descriptions these are not listed as diphthongs.

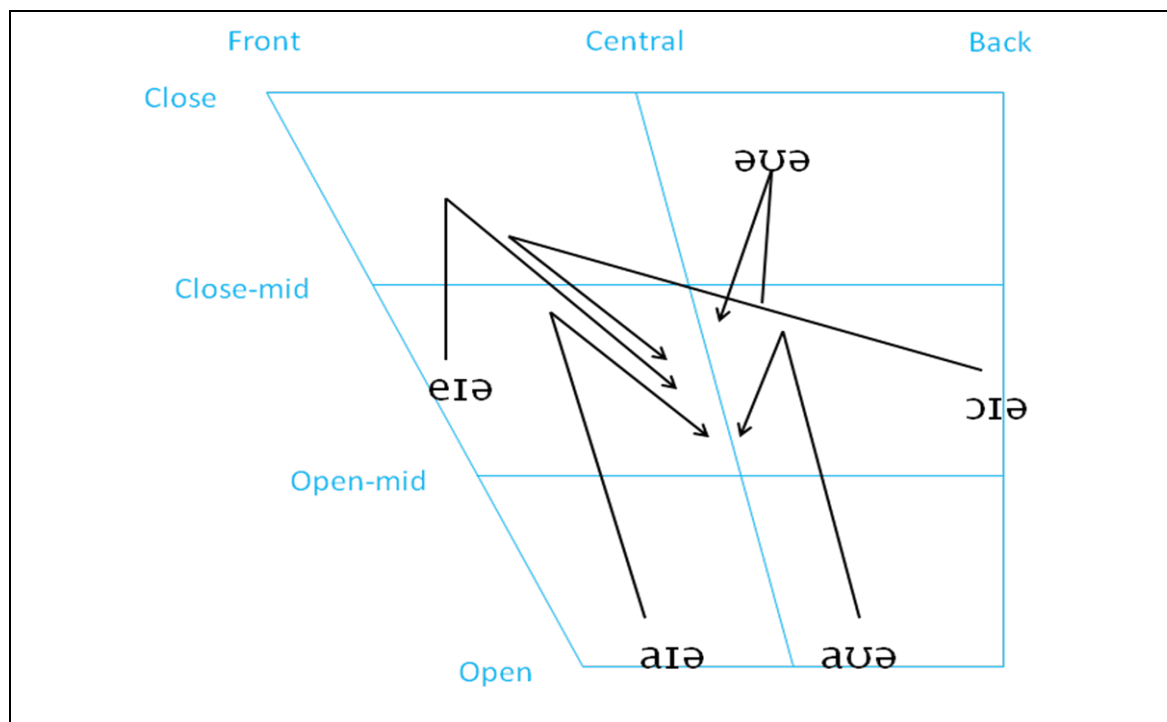
In GA and most American Varieties of English, there are two more possible diphthongs:

/ɔɚ/ e.g. 'or', 'fourth'
 /aɚ/ e.g. 'are', 'car'

These can also be written e.g. /ɔr/, /ar/ in phonemic transcription. In many descriptions these are not listed as diphthongs in American English.

¹² In American English the quality of the first vowel is different; it is a back mid vowel: /o/, as in 'own' /oʊn/.

The Triphthongs of English



The table above shows the triphthongs of RP (Received Pronunciation). The arrows show the direction of the glides between three vowels. The most significant differences between British and American English are explained in the footnotes.

/eɪə/ *layer*¹³, *bayonet*

/əʊə/¹⁴ *mower*¹³, *lower*

/aɪə/ *fire*¹³, *higher*

/aʊə/ *hour*¹³, *shower*

/ɔɪə/ *lawyer*¹³, *royal*

¹³ In RP and many varieties of British English the final *r* of all triphthongs is not pronounced, but in GA and most American Varieties of English, the final *r* is typically pronounced with an *r*-coloured vowel: /ɚ/, e.g.

'layer' /leɪɚ/,

'fire' /faɪɚ/,

'lawyer' /lɔɪɚ/,

'lower' /ləʊɚ/,

'hour' /aʊɚ/.

These can also be written 'layer' /'leɪjər/, 'fire' /'fajər/, 'lawyer' /'lɔɪjər/ or /'ləjər/, 'lower' /'ləʊər/, 'hour' /'aʊər/ in phonemic transcription. In many descriptions these are not listed as triphthongs in American English.

¹⁴ In American English the quality of the first vowel is different; it is a back mid vowel: /o/, as in 'lower' /ləʊər/.