

Lecture 1: Overview of English Vowels and Consonants

1. Vowels

The vowel is a sound in the production of which the air stream does not meet an obstruction and there is no noise component. Vowels are classified according to:

- tongue height (high, mid, low)
- tongue position (front, central, back)
- lip position (rounded vs unrounded)
- vowel length (short vs long)

In British English, we have **20 vowel sounds** divided into **5 long vowels**, **7 short vowels** and **8 diphthongs** (*gliding vowels*), which are a composed of a combination of *two short vowels*.

- Pure vowels are also classified according to the part of the tongue involved in their articulation: Front vowels, central vowels and back vowels as shown in figure 1.
- Diphthongs are divided into closing and centring depending whether the glides is towards the closing or centring area as shown in figure 2.

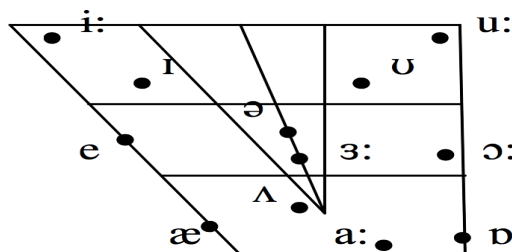


Fig 1 : Pure RP vowels

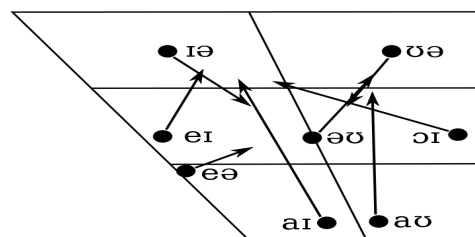


Fig 2 : RP diphthongs

2. Consonants

Consonants are defined phonetically as sounds made by a closure or narrowing in the vocal tract so that the airflow is either completely blocked, or restricted with an audible friction. There are 24 consonantal phonemes classified in the table below into two general categories:

A. In this class, we find plosive, fricatives and affricates in which there is a total closure or a stricture causing friction and there is a distinctive opposition between fortis and lenis sounds.

B. In this class, there is a partial closure or an oral or nasal escape of air. Such articulations are typically voiced and frictionless. They share many phonetic features with vowel sounds.

Place of Articulation \ Manner of Articulation		Place of Articulation								
		Bilabial	Labio-dental	Dental	Alveolar	Post-alveolar	Palato-alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
A	Plosive	p, b			t, d				k, g	
	Fricative		f, v	θ, ð	s, z		ʃ, ʒ			h
	Affricate						tʃ, dʒ			
B	Nasal	m			n				ŋ	
	Lateral				l					
	Approximant ¹	w				r		j		

Table 1: RP consonant phonemes

2.1. Tips for phonetic transcription

Letters	phonemes	examples
c	/s, k/ voiceless	cellar /'si:lə/ club /klʌb/, access /ək'ses/, account /ə'kaʊnt/ _
ck	/k/	Clock /klɒk/, pick /pɪk/, peacock /'pi:kɒk/
g	/g, dʒ, ʒ/ voiced	Get /get/, Ginger /'dʒɪndʒə / , age /eidʒ/, beige /beɪʒ/
qu	/kw/	Queen /kwɪ:n/, quality /'kwɒləti/, quit /kwɪt/, quite /kwaɪt/
s	/s, z/ or /ʒ/ in some words	Sign /sam/, signal /'sɪgnəl/, basis, /'beɪsəs/, measure /'meɪʒə/, please /pli:z/, realise /'ri:əlaɪz/, based /beɪzd/, vision /'vɪʒən/
th	/θ or ð /	thigh /θaɪ/, bath, thorough /'θʌrə/, there, thy, thee, bathe
x	/ks/ or /gz/	box /bɒks/, xerox /'ziərɒks/, exit /'egɪt/, exact /ɪg'zækt/.
sh, ti, ssi	/ʃ/	Fish / /, station / /, expression / /, Russia / /
j, g, dg	/dʒ/	Judge / /, cage / /, wage / /, gadget / /, hedge.
ch, tch, tu	/tʃ/	Teacher / /, butcher / /, nature / /, puncture / /
y	/j/	Yoke / /, yeah, yesterday / /, yeast / /, yawn / /, yield / /
r	/r/	Real / /, Create / /, clearing / /, fear / /, care / /, explore / /, wear / /, sphere / /. In RP, /r/ is only pronounced/transcribed <i>before</i> a vowel or when being <i>intervocalic</i> .

2.2. Tips for pronunciation of final 's' and 'ed'

1.2.1 Pronunciation of regular plurals, genitive- and 3rd person singular «s»:

/s/ after voiceless sounds (consonants): cats, tips, kicks, faults.

/z/ after all voiced sounds (some consonants and all vowels): pens, cars, songs, vows.

/ɪz/ after sibilants: /s, z, ʃ, tʃ, ʒ, dʒ/: bosses, fuzzes, dishes, boxes, judges, searches

1.2.2 Pronunciation of regular verbs in past and past participle «ed»:

/t/ after voiceless sounds (consonants)

/d/ after voiced sounds (some consonants and all vowels)

/ɪd/ after /d/ and /t/

Task 1: Transcribe the following words

Kicked , passed , skipped , finished , banned ,
 followed , stayed , skied , amended , sorted ,
 wanted , moved , laughed , agreed , showered ,
 wired , numbered , smoothed , robes , ropes ,
 doors , wells , homes , troughs , myths ,
 lambs , youths , roses , buses , hours , batches ,
 ridges , garages , John's , Pete's , Luisa's

Task 2: Write the spellings for the following transcribed words:

1- /ðæt/ , /haʊ'evə/ , /ə'nʌðə/ /, 'dɪfɪkəlt/ , /wɜ:lɪd/ , /ðeə/
/'θʌrə/ , /wɪtʃ/ , /'eəriə/ , /kɔ:s/ , /'ʌndə/ , /ʃʊd/
/'nevə/ , /brɪ'twi:n/ , /'sʌmθɪŋ/ , /pɔɪnt/ , /hɪə/ , /lɑ:dʒ/ .

Task 3: Find the mistakes: /craɪm/ /wreslɪŋ/ /pɑ:rkɪŋ/
/waɪvs/ /θi:z/ /jækɪt/ /yeləʊ/ /sɪxti/

Task 4: Transcribe the following words phonemically

Allow / /; Follow / /, Book / /, Why / /; Sorrow / /;
Pool / /, Hurry / /; Sorry / /; Now / /; Orange / /;
There / /; Dear / /; Their / /, Here / /; Junior / /;
Dare / /; Liar / /; Buyer / /; Layer / /; Employer / /;
More / /; Isle / /; Bathe / /, Fur / /; Mayor / /;
Boy / /; Cheers / /, Soap / /; What / /, Good / /.

Task 5: Transcribe the following words phonemically (pay attention to finals):

Spying / /; Chewing / /, Cried / /; Fetched / /, Lies / /
Crossed / /; Needed / /; Blessings / /; Kings / /; Bills/ /.

3. Detailed study of consonants: allophones:

3.1 A phoneme is the smallest sound that can make a difference in meaning. There are 44 phonemes in standard British English (RP). Some of them may be realized differently or have a variety of allophones.

3.2. An allophone is any of the various phonetic realizations of a phoneme, which do not contribute to distinctions of meaning. For example, /p/ in **pin** /pɪn/ is aspirated [p^hɪn] and /p/ in **spin** /spɪn/ is unaspirated [spɪn]. The first one [p^h] is an allophone of the phoneme /p/.

In [prə'p^həʊzɪ] the allophone [p^h] is **aspirated** and [ɪ] is **dark & syllabic**.

What is aspiration?

Definition of aspiration: it is when the production of /p/, /t/, /k/ is followed by an audible plosion (burst of noise) in the post release phase, producing a sound like h represented as [h].

Examples of allophones:

1. Plosives: the Voiceless Fortis Plosives /p, t, k/ are **aspirated** [p^h, t^h, k^h] when **initial** in a **stressed syllable**. However, they are **unaspirated** in **final position** or when preceded by /s/.

2. Lateral: the English alveolar lateral phoneme /l/ has three main allophones:

a. Clear [l] with a relatively front resonance before **vowels** and /j/ or when it is intervocalic

E.g.: lead [li:d] follow ['fɒləʊ] lose [lu:z] sailor ['seɪlə] believe [brɪ'li:v]

b. **Dark** [ɫ] is articulated with a relatively back vowel resonance, final after a vowel⁽¹⁾, before a consonant preceded by a vowel⁽²⁾ and as a syllabic sound followed by a consonant⁽³⁾.

c. **Voiceless** [ɬ] becomes voiceless when it is preceded by accented /p, k/

E.g.: class [kɫɑ:s] clap [kɫæp] clean [kɫn:i] place [pɫeɪs] pleasure ['pɫeʒə] please [pɫz:i]

Task 6: Transcribe the following words phonetically

1. Feel canal pearl call well all
2. Help salt cold milk film elbow
3. Apple middle eagle table trouble able
4. Trial plead clever student clown plague

Task 7: Transcribe the following poem phonetically (homework)

I take it you already know
Of tough and bough and cough and dough?
Others may stumble, but not you
On hiccough, thorough, slough, and through.
Well don't! And now you wish, perhaps,
To learn of less familiar traps.
Beware of heard, a dreadful word
That looks like beard but sounds like bird.
And dead: it's said like bed, not bead,
For goodness sake don't call it deed!
Watch out for meat and great and threat
(They rhyme with suite and straight and debt).
A moth is not a moth as in mother
Nor both as in bother, nor broth as in brother,
And here is not a match for there,
Nor dear and fear, for bear and pear.
And then there's dose and rose and lose
Just look them up--and goose and choose
And cork and work and card and ward
And font and front and word and sword
And do and go, then thwart and cart,
Come, come! I've hardly made a start.
A dreadful language? Why man alive!
I learned to talk it when I was five.
And yet to write it, the more I tried,
I hadn't learned it at fifty-five.

References for further reading

Roach, P. (2009). *English phonetics and phonology. 4th ed.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Hancock, M. (2003). *English pronunciation in use intermediate.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.