

University of Sétif 2
Department of English Language
Phonetics Course (1st Year)
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II. Diphthongs

English is particularly *rich* in **diphthongs**. Unlike pure vowels, which remain constant and do not glide, diphthongs are vowels in which two vowel qualities can be perceived, and the articulators move from the production of one vowel to the other.

In terms of **length**, diphthongs are similar to the long vowels. **Yet**, the most important thing to remember about all the diphthongs is that **the first part** of the **diphthong** is **longer** and **stronger** than the **second** and is often referred as to the *nucleus of the diphthong*. As a result, **the second part** is just a **glide** whose full formation is not accomplished. The quality of the phoneme reduces to **quite short** and **decreases in loudness**. The organs of speech only move toward the articulation of the glide, but they are not set to pronounce it fully. Therefore, **the last part** of English diphthongs must not be made too strongly.

The **total number** of diphthongs is **eight** (*though əʊ is increasingly rare*): /eɪ/, /aɪ/, /ɔɪ/, /ɪə/, /eə/, /ʊə/, /əʊ/, /aʊ/.

The easiest way to remember them is in terms of three groups composed as follows in this diagram (*Fig. 1*):

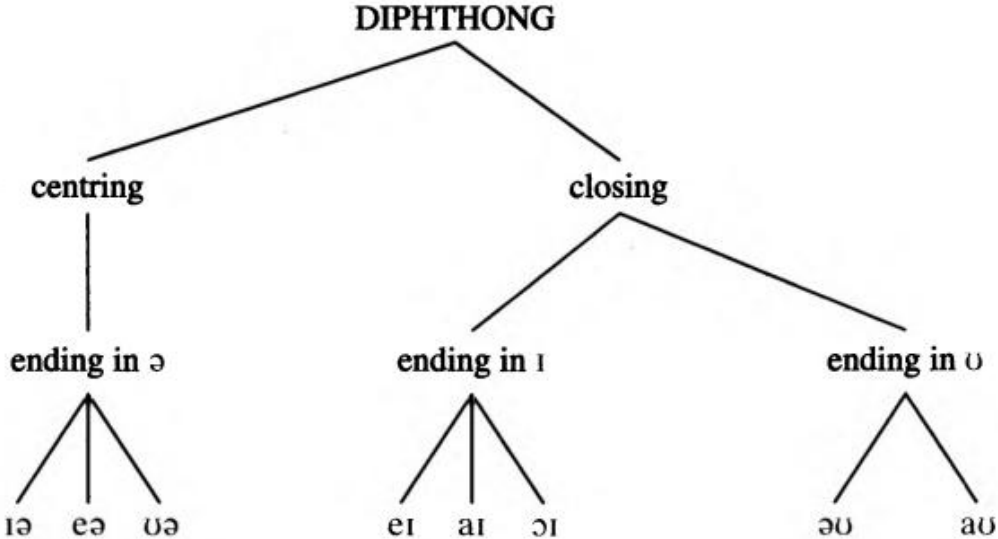


Fig.1 Diphthongs

Thus, diphthongs are usually grouped into the following three categories, depending on the height and advancement of the tongue:

➤ The *diphthongs* that *glide toward* the vowel /ə/ in the centre of the oral cavity are known as centring to /ə/: /ɪə/, /eə/, /ʊə/;

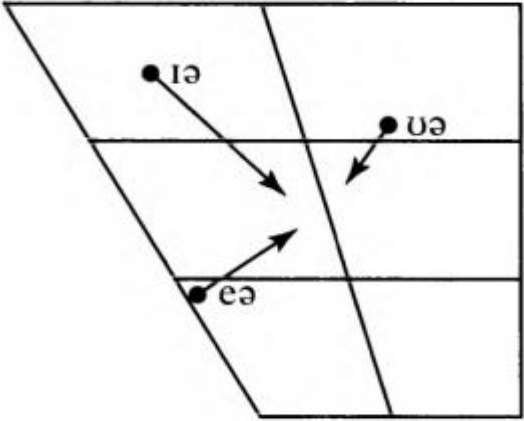
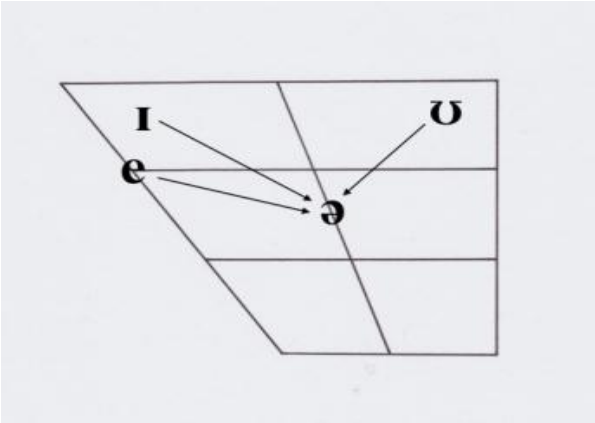


Figure 2. Centring diphthongs

- The *diphthongs* that *glide toward a higher position in the mouth* to reach the close sound /ɪ/ are known as closing to /ɪ/: /eɪ/, /aɪ/, /ɔɪ/;
- The *diphthongs* that *glide toward a higher position in the mouth* to reach the close sound /ʊ/ are known as closing to /ʊ/: /əʊ/, /aʊ/.

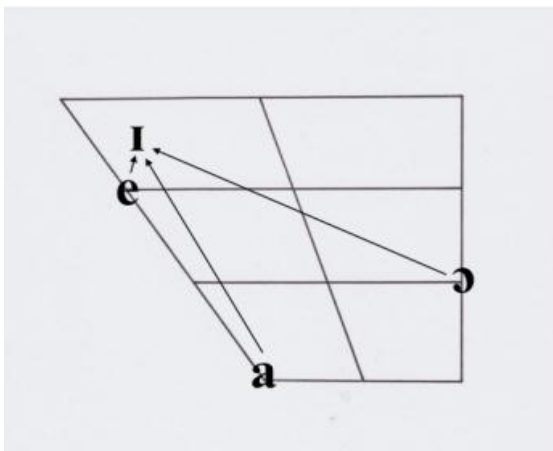


Figure 3. Closing to /ɪ/ diphthongs

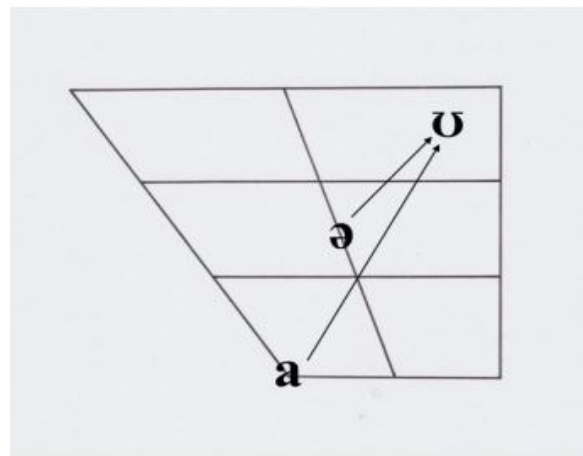


Figure 4. Closing to /ʊ/ diphthongs

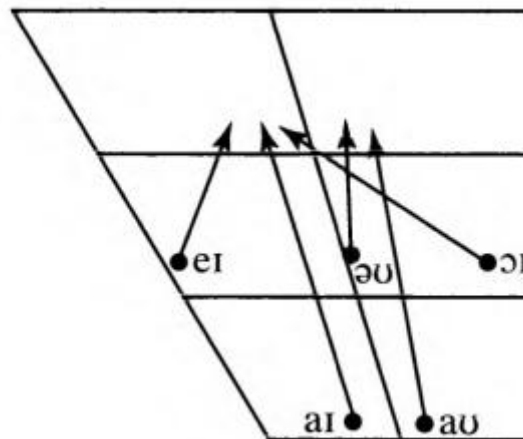


Figure 5. Combination of diphthongs closing to /ɪ/ and /ʊ/