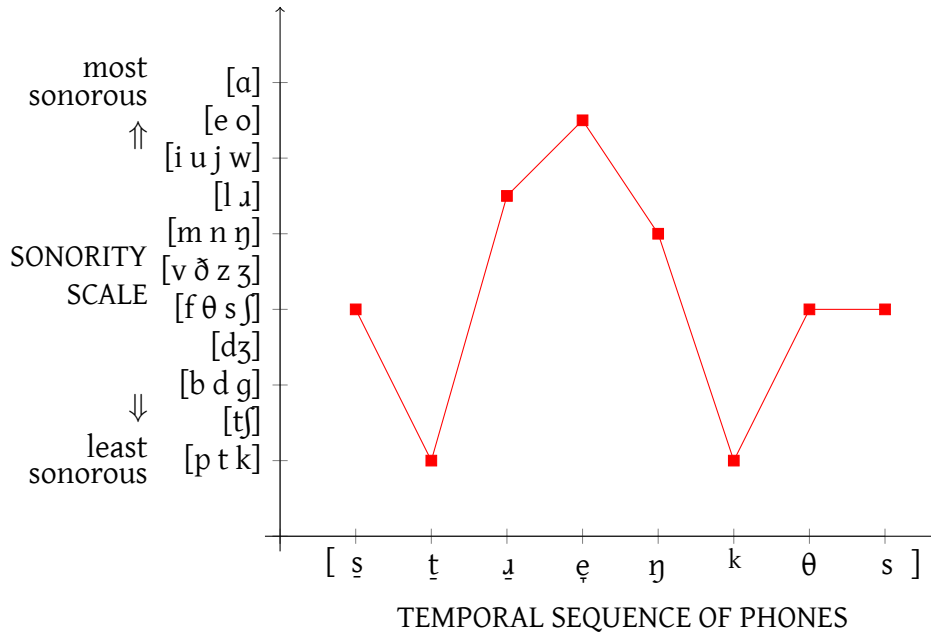




The syllable and sonority: key

Here is my first attempt at plotting the degrees of sonority perceivable in the individual phones of [stɹɛŋ^kθs] as they whizz by (and slightly flow into each other).



The example shown here — <strengths>, /stɹɛŋθs/, [stɹɛŋ^kθs] — is probably one of the longest types of syllables that are even possible in English, and as you can see from the different degrees of sonority as the individual sounds flow past one by one, it looks almost as though the initial [s] and the final [θs] are, in an acoustic sense, ‘outside’ the syllable.

There are simpler syllables than this in English: for example the syllable [ɑ:] — as in:

[ˈɑ: | ðə.ˈlɛt.ə.bi.ˈfɔ:ɪ.ˈɛs]

<R, the letter before S.>

[ˈɑ:..ðeɪ.ˈɡʊd.ˈfrɛnz.əv.jɔ:z]

<Are they good friends of yours?>

[ðeɪˈɑ: | ɑ:ˈbɛs.ˈfrɛnz.m.ˈfækt]

<They are. Our best friends, in fact.>

All you need in order to have a syllable, is something reasonably sonorous. To have a syllable, there must be a ‘peak’ (if you’re trying to link phonetics to acoustics), or ‘Nucleus’ (if you’re trying to link phonetics to phonology); the bits on the edge (in the ‘valley’, at the ‘margins’, in Initial (Onset) and Final (Coda) positions) are optional. Often they are present, but sometimes they are not.

If a syllable is rhythmically ‘weak’, because it is unstressed, then its vowel can be weakened, becoming [ə], or even disappearing all together, and a reasonably sonorous consonant from the end of the syllable can come to function as the peak instead, as in [ˈbɒt.m̩], [ˈbʌt.n̩], [ˈbɒt.t̩].