Unit 6

The contrastive phonology of the syllable nucleus

Why English vowels and diphthongs may seem difficult

Slides for the session of
Practical English Phonetics /
Phonetics with Listening Practice (British & General)
held on
17 November 2026

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Transatlantic relations

IPA practice

Goals

Important issues

The vowel quadrilateral and the IPA cardinal vowels

English short monophthongs

BrE and AmE vowel systems compared

Sic transit gloria mundi

English long monophthongs and diphthongs

English reduced vowels in weak syllables

Homework ; -)

Dedication

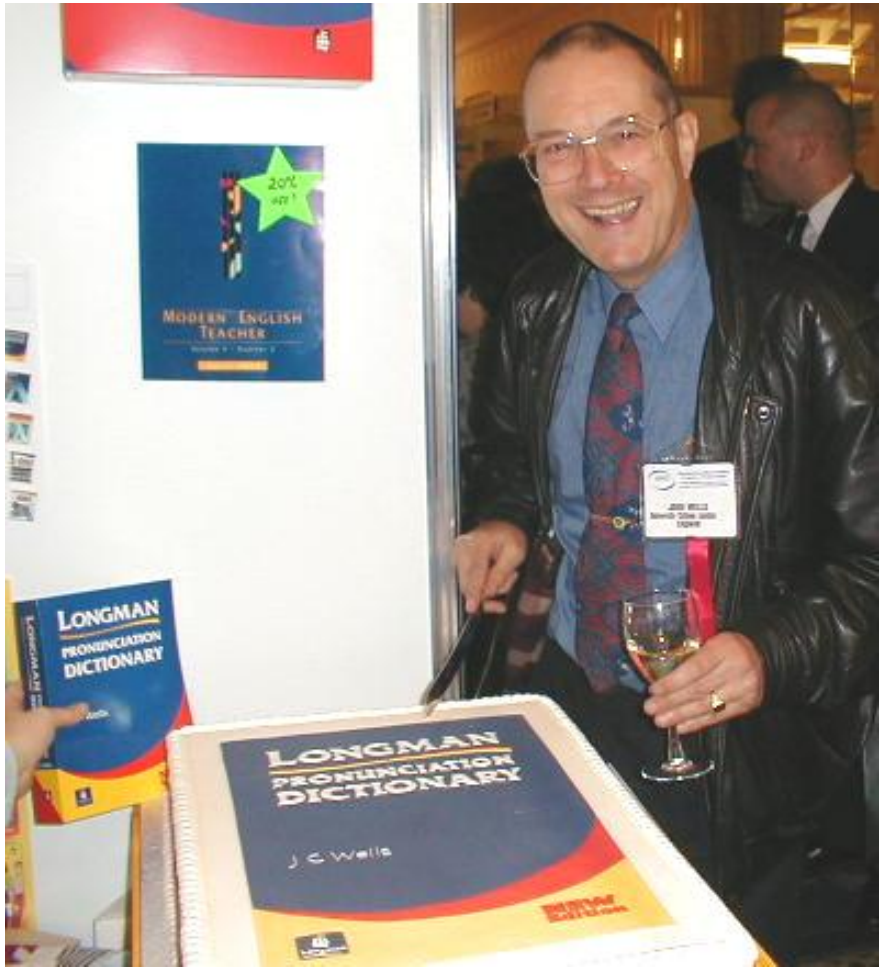


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John Christopher WELLS (born 11.03.1939)

The daily horror the British are forced to face in the U.S.

- https://www.youtube.com/shorts/o2Q4_3-AAVU

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- If this link is not working …
- … just search the Internet for “Maggie Smith tea” and you will find dozens of others.

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Homework ;-)

George Orwell's rules for making 'A Nice Cup of Tea'

- Choose one of the following transcriptions, depending on your preferred dialect of English, and read it aloud:
- BrE:
  ˈfɜːst əv ˈɔːl
  wʌn ʃʊd ˈjuːz ˈɪnd i ən ɔː ˌsɪl ə ˈniːz ˌtiː
- AmE:
  ˈfɜɹst əv ˈɔːl
  wʌn ʃʊd ˈjuːz ˈɪnd i ən ɔɹ ˌseɪl ə ˈniːz ˌtiː

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    3. the "broad" accent of Australian English (AuE: broad)
4. To begin practising (AmE: practicing) some of the English monophthong and diphthong vowel phonemes that can be problematic for speakers of other languages

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- Vowel quadrilateral or vowel triangle? (see next issue …)

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  - Mary–marry–merry merger in modern GA AmE

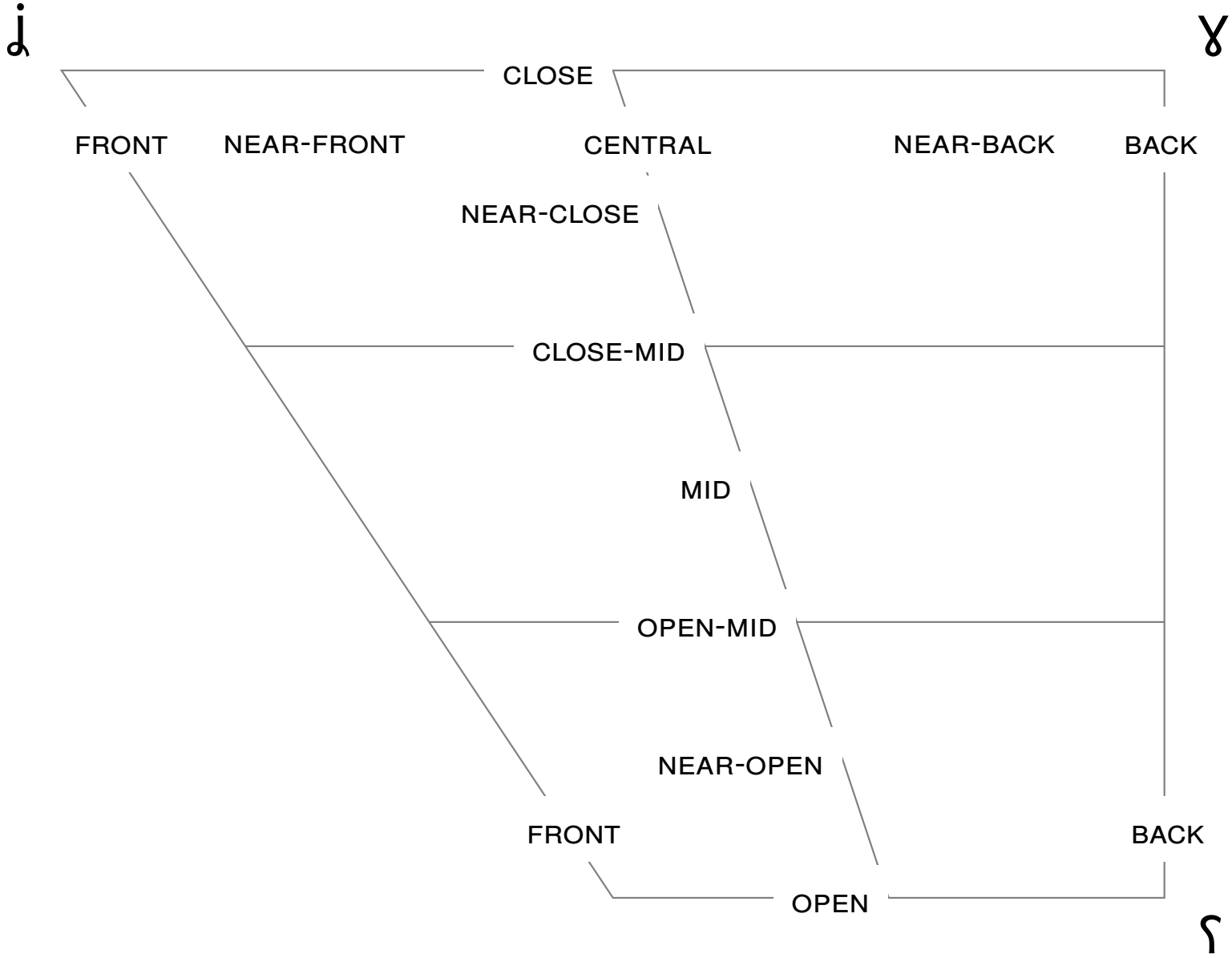
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  - PALM–LOT–CLOTH–THOUGHT merger in modern GA AmE

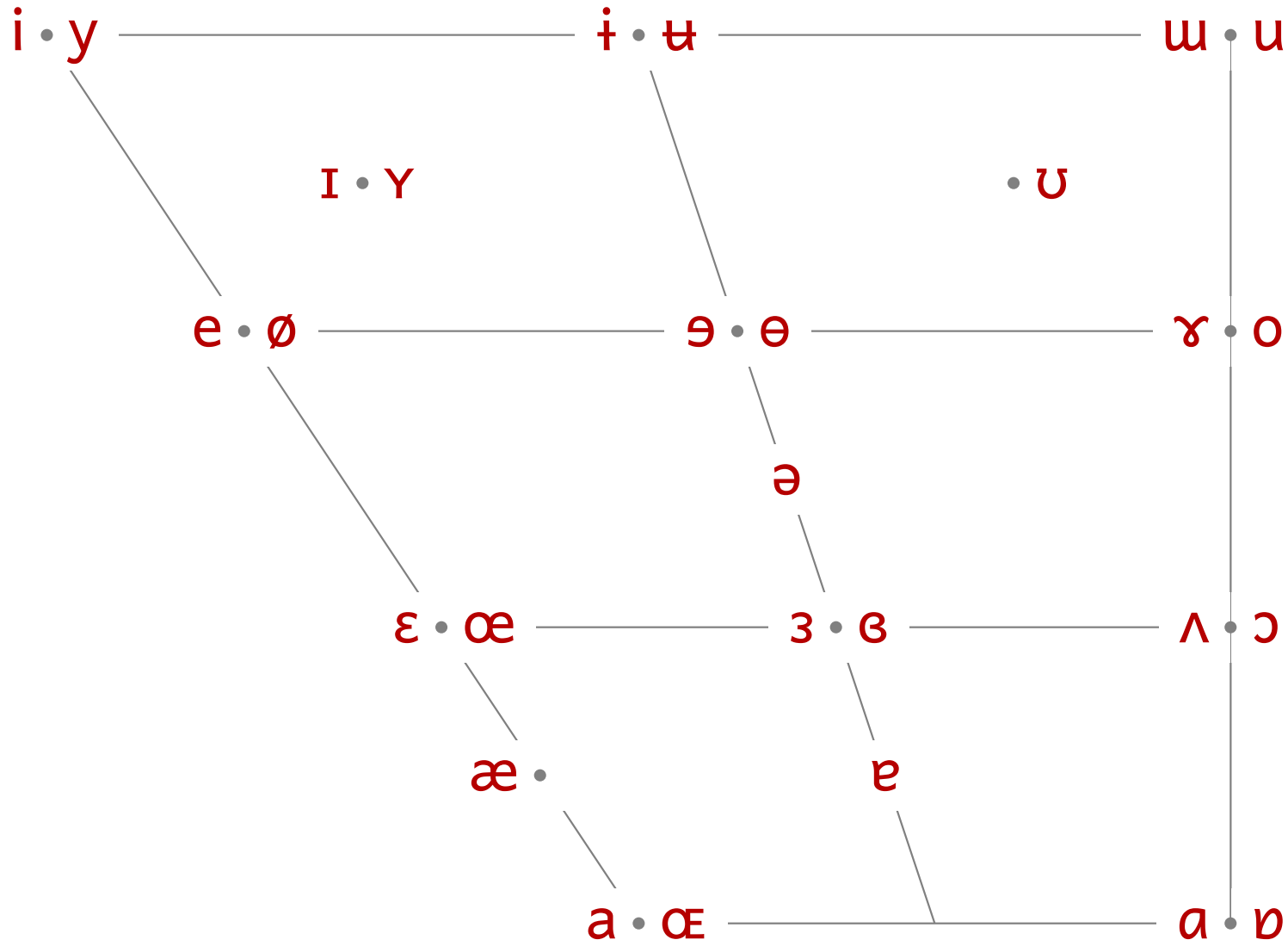
Middle English monophthongs (simplified)

front		central		back		
long	short			short	long	
tense	lax			lax	tense	
iː	i			u	uː	close
eː	e			o	oː	close-mid
ɛː					ɔː	open-mid
		a	aː			open
		lax	tense			
		short	long			
unrounded		unrounded		rounded		

Vowel Quadrilateral



Cardinal Vowels



(Fr.:) «les (‘voyelles’) cardinales» … dressed in red :-) …
… they have numbers:
`https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cardinal_vowels`

Skip this

יִגְוַע (Genesis 6:17)
‘soll untergehen’ [Lutherbibel 1545]
‘will die’ [Authorised (King James) Version 1611]
yiḡ·wāʿ
[jiɣˈwɑʕ]
[j] (palatal approximant)
⇓
[ʝ] (palatal fricative)
[ʝiɣˈwɑʕ] (e.g. articulated in anger)
This sequence of sounds fully maps out the anatomical vowel space …

[	i	u	ɑ	]
[	ʝ	ɣ	ʕ	]

… within the boundaries defined by turbulent airflow
Root:
גוע ‘expire, perish, die’ (Strong’s Concordance Number 1478); cf Arabic
جاع ‘be empty, hungry’

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Homework ; -)

English short monophthongs: lexical sets



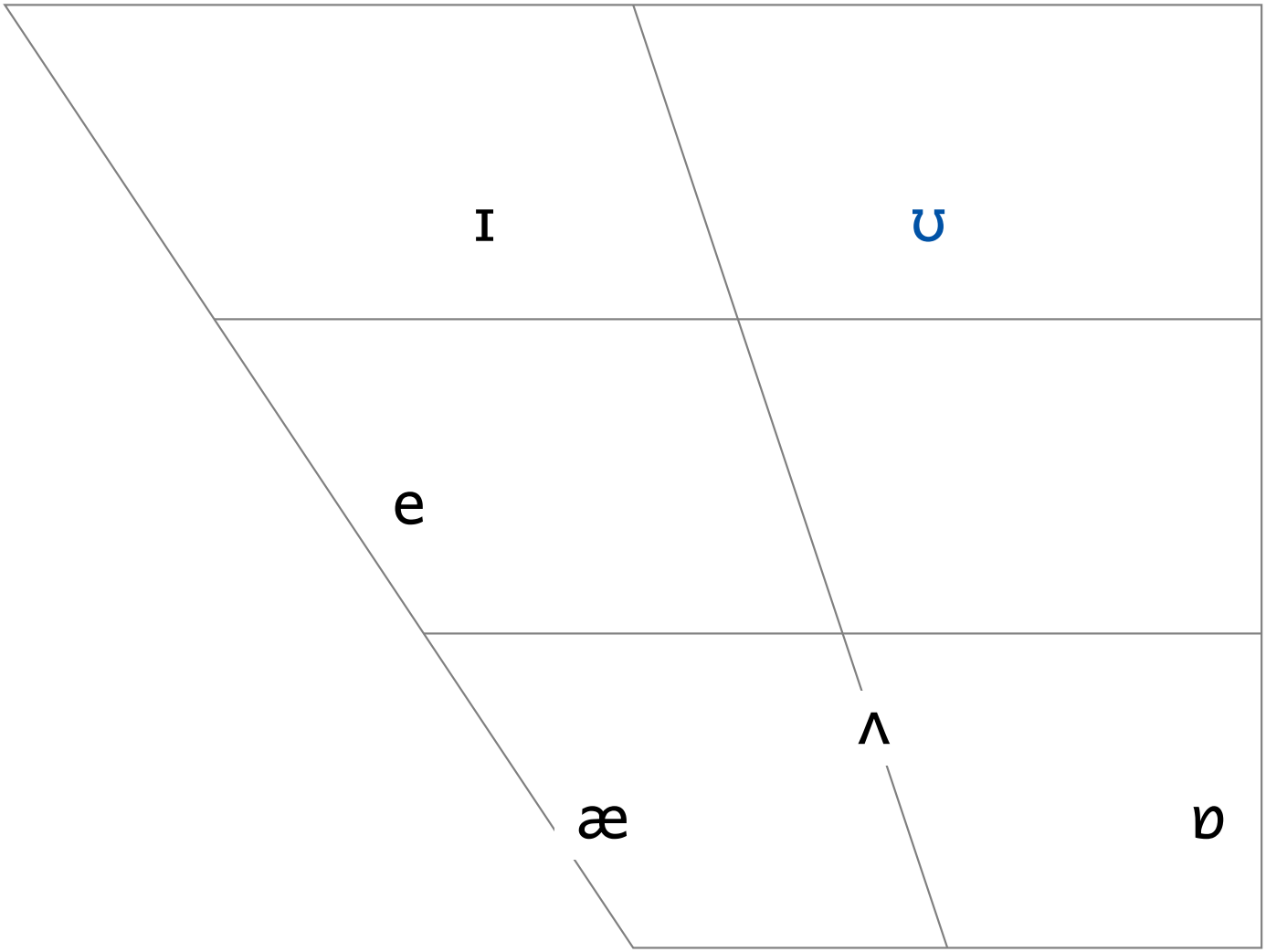
Why the gap at the back?

Hint:

⟨put⟩ ⟨cut⟩ ⟨come⟩ ⟨long⟩

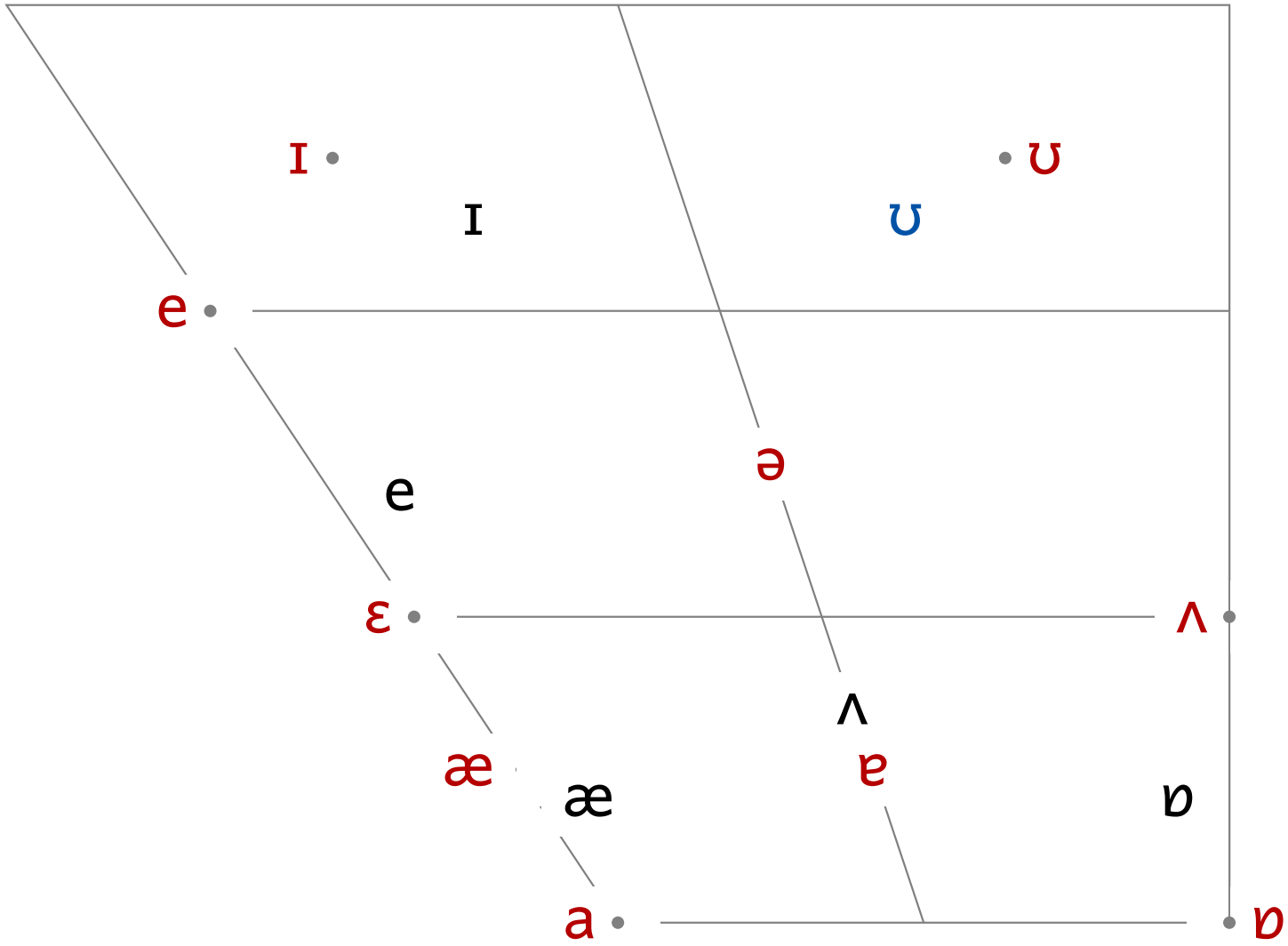
/pʊt/ /kʌt/ /kʌm/ /lɒŋ/

English short monophthongs



Front vowels /æ e ɪ/: AusE, older RP [ɛ e i]; newest RP [a ɛ ɪ] (straight line); NZE, white SAfE [ɛ ɪ ə] (telephone dial)
Back open vowel: AmE unrounded /ɑ /, not rounded /ɒ/.

BrE (RP)* short monophthongs compared with cardinal vowels



*more Charles and Camilla than William and Kate

English short vowels: examples

pit	pet	pat	pot	putt	put
/pɪt/	/pet/	/pæt/	/pɒt/ (/pɑt/)	/pʌt/	/pʊt/
[pʰɪt]	[pʰɛ̟t]	[pʰæt]	[pʰɒt] ([pʰɑt])	[pʰɐt]	[pʰʊt]

bit	bid	wick	wig	nip	nib	hiss	his
[bɪt]	[bɪˑd]	[wɪk]	[wɪˑg]	[nɪp]	[nɪˑb]	[hɪs]	[hɪˑz]

set	said	debt	dead	etch	edge	cess	says
[sɛ̟t]	[sɛ̟ˑd]	[dɛ̟t]	[dɛ̟ˑd]	[ɛ̟ʧ]	[ɛ̟ˑd͡ʒ]	[sɛ̟s]	[sɛ̟ˑz]

fat	fad	back	bag	batch	badge	slap	slab
[fæt]	[fæˑd]	[bæk]	[bæˑg]	[bæʧ]	[bæˑd͡ʒ]	[slæp]	[slæˑb]

cop	cob	knot	nod	lock	log	hops	Hobbes
[kʰɒp]	[kʰɒˑb]	[nɒt]	[nɒˑd]	[lɒk]	[lɒˑg]	[hɒps]	[hɒˑbz]

cup	cub	duck	dug	fuss	fuzz	once	ones
[kʰɐp]	[kʰɐˑb]	[dɐk]	[dɐˑg]	[fɐs]	[fɐˑz]	[wɐns]	[wɐˑnz]

put	bush	soot	foot	wool	stood	hood	good
[pʰʊt]	[bʊʃ]	[sʊt]	[fʊt]	[wʊˑl]	[stʊˑd]	[hʊˑd]	[gʊˑd]

Vowel ‘clipping’

- English vowels are about one-sixth shorter before a ‘fortis’ final consonant, like /p/, than before a ‘lenis’ final consonant, like /b/. Two examples from a Luxembourgish English learner: *search* sounded like *surge*, and (‘rock band’) *merch* sounded like *merge*, because the vowels before fortis /tʃ/ should be a little shorter than the vowels before lenis /dʒ/.
- English vowels are also shortened if they are followed by unstressed syllables:
  search–searching–searchable
  these three words have approximately the same length,
  e.g. in

SEARCH	*warrant*
searching	EVERYWHERE
searchable	DOCUMENTS

- You can find a description here:
  `http://spence.saar.de/phonetics/TIMING_two_problems/`

English short vowels: more examples

kit	dress	strap	lot	strut	foot
/kɪt/	/dres/	/stræp/	/lɒt/	/strʌt/	/fʊt/
[kʰɪt]	[d̪ɻ̟ɛ̟s]	[s̪t̪ɻæp]	[lɒt]	[s̪t̪ɻɐt]	[fʊt]

it fits him | big business stinks | Tim hit his shins |
/ɪt fɪts hɪm/ /bɪg ˈbɪznɪs stɪŋks/ /*tɪm hɪt hɪz ʃɪnz/

let's get set | lead's heavy | a gem sale isn't the same as a jam sale |
/lets get set/ /ledz ˈhevi/ /ə ʤem seɪl ɪz.nt ðə seɪm əz ə ʤæm seɪl/

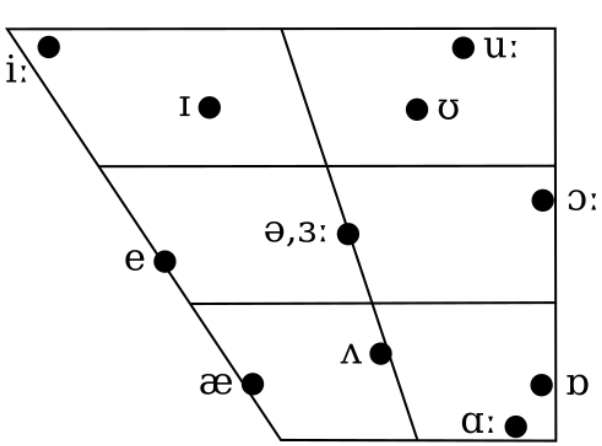
the black cat tried to catch a rat | the back hatstand is for caps |
/ðə blæk kæt traɪ̯d tu kætʃ ə ræt/ /ðə bæk ˈhætstænd ɪz fə kæps/

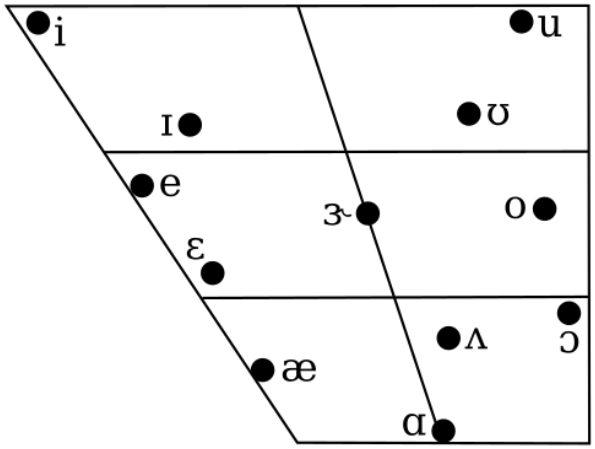
I want to wander in the tropics | Don Johnson is on top |
/aɪ wɒnt tu ˈwɒndəɹ ɪn ðə ˈtrɒpɪks/ /*dɒn *ˈdʒɒnsən ɪz ɒn tɒp/

cut up the tough stuff | it's lovely honey and butter |
/kʌt ʌp ðə tʌf stʌf/ /ɪts ˈlʌvli ˈhʌni ən ˈbʌtə (ˈbʌtər)/

look, full of books | Cook took a look | Cook took Brook's rook |
/lʊk | fʊl əv bʊks/ /*kʊk tʊk ə lʊk/ /*kʊk tʊk *brʊks rʊk/

BrE (RP) vs AmE (GA) monophthongs





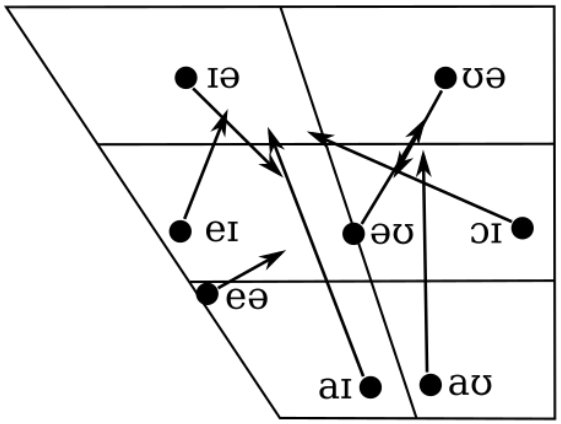
Left: A fairly conservative variety of RP (Roach, 2004:242).
Right: General American (Wells 1982:486); note that vowel length is not distinctive in American English. The variety of GA shown here does not (yet) have the 'cot'-'caught' merger, so /ɑ/ and /ɔ/ are shown as separate vowels.

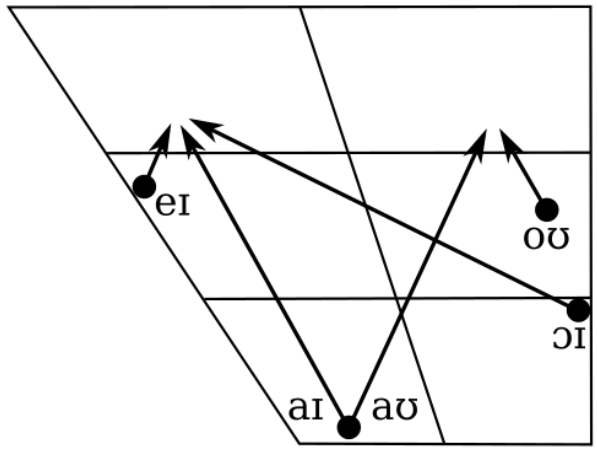
Sources:

Roach, Peter (2004), "British English: Received Pronunciation" (PDF), Journal of the International Phonetic Association, 34 (2): 239–245, doi:10.1017/S0025100304001768, S2CID 144338519

Wells, John C. (1982). Accents of English. Vol. 1: An Introduction (pp. i–xx, 1–278), Vol. 3: Beyond the British Isles (pp. i–xx, 467–674). Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/CBO9780511611766. ISBN 0-52129719-2, 0-52128541-0.

BrE (RP) vs AmE (GA) diphthongs





Left: Closing—not "rising" (!)—and centering diphthongs of a fairly conservative variety of RP (Roach, 2004:242).

Right: Closing—not "rising" (!)—diphthongs of General American (Wells, 1982:286). AmE does not have centering diphthongs.

Sources:

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Wikipedia's "diaphoneme" approach

- Wikipedia has a pronunciation key that attempts to cover all major vareties of English.
- It is biased towards AmE in some ways (e.g., it always represents post-vocalic r) but not in others.
- If you're interested: `https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Help:IPA/English`
- My aim for the next iteration of this course is to use the Wikipedia diaphoneme system for all phonemic transcriptions.
- The rest of this week's slides still use phonemic and phonetic transcriptions for BrE; AmE pronunciations will be discussed as they arise.

Centering diphthongs in (older) 'Broad' Australian English

- Older Australians speaking 'Cultivated' or 'Normal' AuE often found the 'Broad' accent aesthetically distasteful.
- Thomas Mann in *Der Tod in Venedig* raises the (old) philosophical question of whether true beauty is something perceived by the senses or something perceived by the intellect.
- The wonderful contrarian (phonetician, medi(a)evalist, etc., etc., etc.) Alex I. Jones, who was my first phonetics teacher back in 1975, described part of the AuE sound system as follows: Eight (8!) peripheral vowel phonemes can be realised either as centering diphthongs or as monophthongs.
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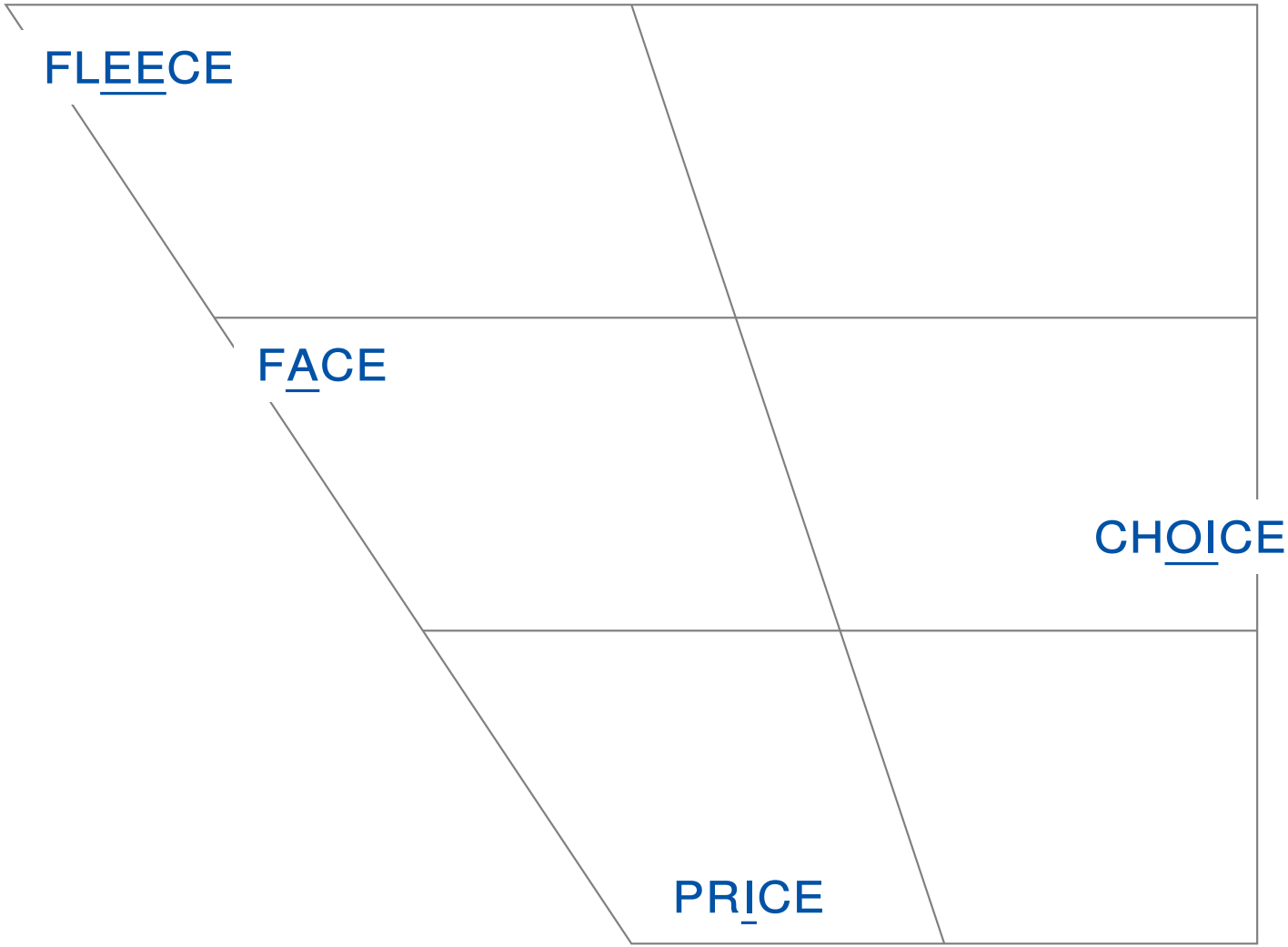
ɪə	i̞ə	ʊə
ɛə		ɔə
æə	aə	ɒə

ɪː	i̞ː	ʊː
ɛː		ɔː
æː	aː	ɒː

beard	bird	gourd
Baird		bored
bad	bard	gone

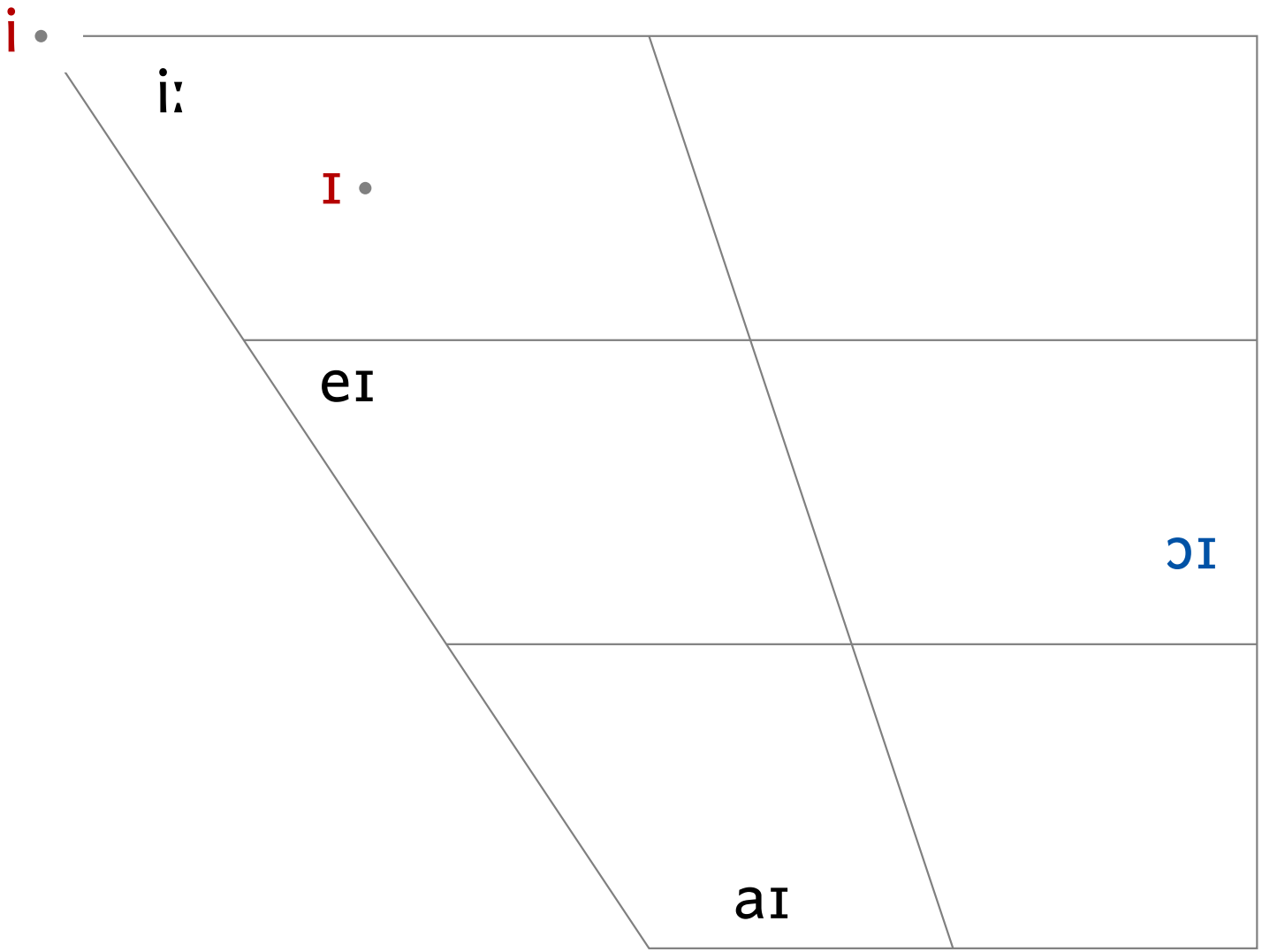
- Unfortunately, this system is now largely extinct.
- Omnia praeclara tam difficilia quam rara.
- Sic transit gloria mundi.

English long monophthongs and diphthongs (1): lexical sets



The FLEECE vowel can be diphthongi{s|z}ed (e.g. AuE).
The FACE vowel can be monophthongi{s|z}ed (e.g. AmE; Yorkshire).
The PRICE and CHOICE vowels are always diphthongs.

English long monophthongs and diphthongs (1): phonemes



English long monophthongs and diphthongs (1): examples

fleece	face	price	choice
/fliːs/	/feɪs/	/praɪs/	/t͡ʃɔɪs/
[fl̪i̪ːs]	[fɛ̝̈ɪ̯̊s]	[pɹ̥̈ä̠ɪ̯̊s]	[t͡ʃɔ̝̈ɪ̯̊s]

fleece	fleas	heat	heed	belief	believe	cease	seize
[fliˑs]	[fliːz]	[hiˑt]	[hiːd]	[bɪˈliˑf]	[bɪˈliːv]	[siˑs]	[siːz]

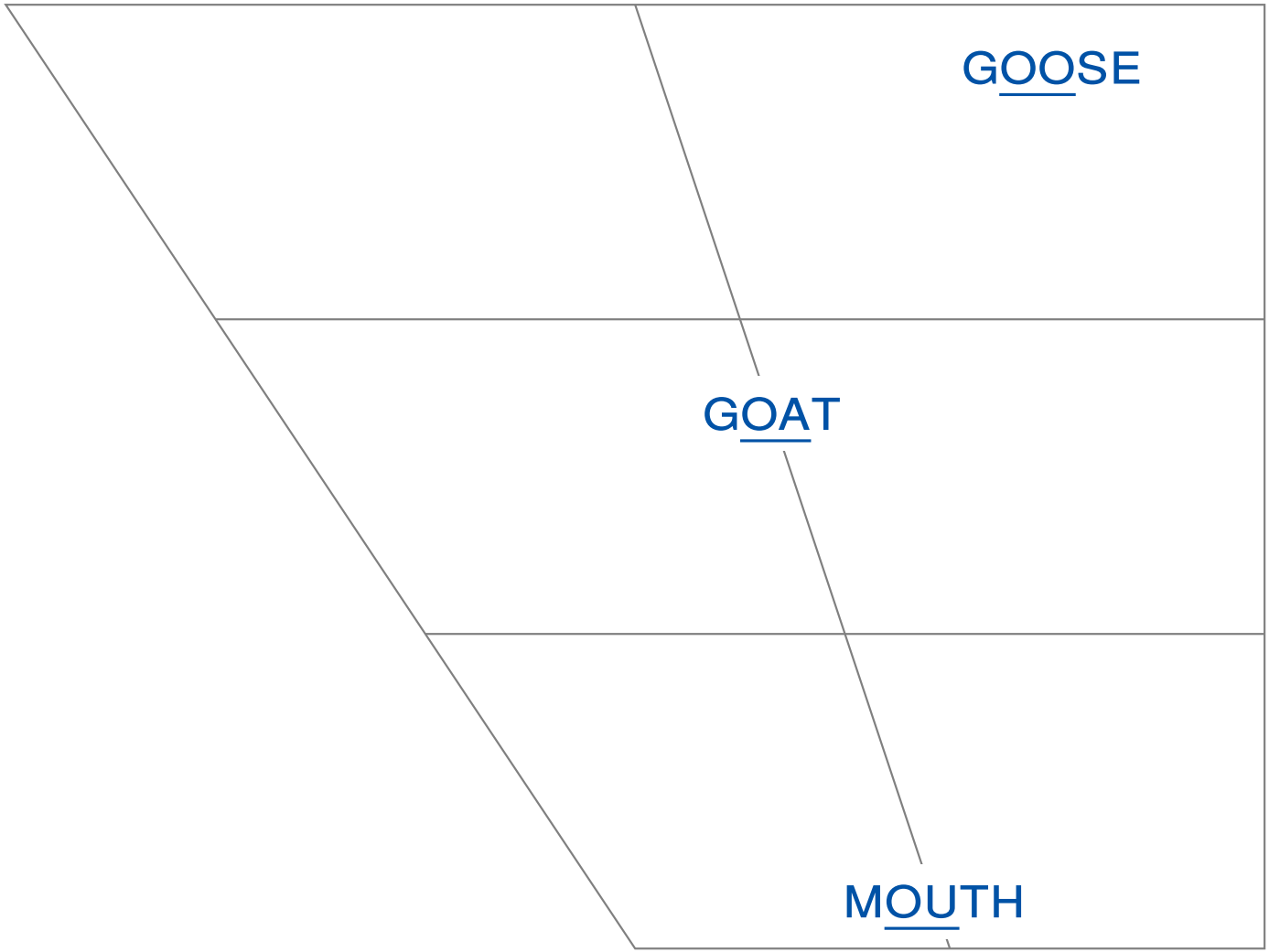
face	phase	pace	pay	wait	wade	fate	fade
[feɪ̯̊s]	[feˑɪ̯̊z]	[pʰeɪ̯̊s]	[pʰeˑɪ̯̊]	[weɪ̯̊t]	[weˑɪ̯̊d]	[feɪ̯̊t]	[feˑɪ̯̊d]

price	prize	ice	eyes	wright	ride	dice	die
[pɹ̥̈ä̠ɪ̯̊s]	[pɹ̥̈ä̠ˑɪ̯̊z]	[ä̠ɪ̯̊s]	[ä̠ˑɪ̯̊z]	[ɹ̈ʷä̠ɪ̯̊t]	[ɹ̈ʷä̠ˑɪ̯̊d]	[dä̠ɪ̯̊s]	[dä̠ˑɪ̯̊]

choice	Choy's	Joyce	joys	quoit	coy	Boyce	boys
[tʃɔ̝̈ɪ̯̊s]	[tʃɔ̝̈ˑɪ̯̊z]	[d͡ʒɔ̝̈ɪ̯̊s]	[d͡ʒɔ̝̈ˑɪ̯̊z]	[kɔ̝̈ɪ̯̊t]	[kɔ̝̈ˑɪ̯̊]	[bɔ̝̈ɪ̯̊s]	[bɔ̝̈ˑɪ̯̊z]

Vowel length [ː] is not *distinctive* in AmE.
We can write /iː/ as /i/ (contrasting with /ɪ/).
But AmE does have vowel clipping (vowels are shorter before fortis consonants than before lenis consonants), so for AmE we can write:
⟨hit⟩ [hɪt] ⟨hid⟩ [hɪːd] ⟨heat⟩ [hit] ⟨heed⟩ [hiːd]

English long monophthongs and diphthongs (2): lexical sets



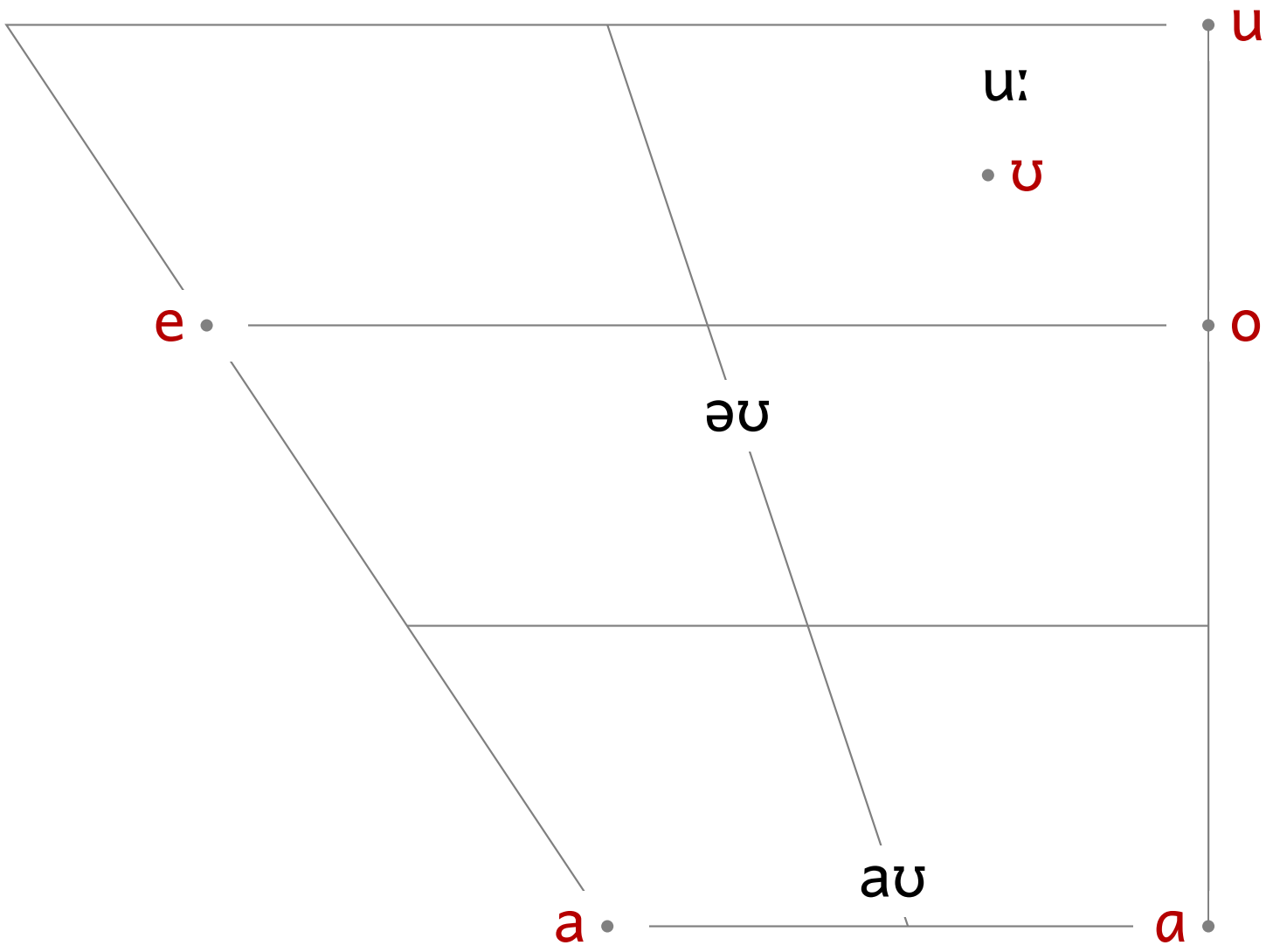
BrE: GOAT diphthong starts as central vowel [ə]

AmE: GOAT diphthong starts as back vowel [o]

Why is it possible for the GOAT vowel to vary so widely?

Hint: Shakespeare's "mewing" cat was *not* a kitten (!) /ɛʊ/→/ju:/

English long monophthongs and diphthongs (2): phonemes



AmE: GOAT diphthong starts as rounded close-mid back vowel [o]
AuE: GOAT diphthong starts as unrounded near-open central vowel [ɐ]

English long monophthongs and diphthongs (2): examples

goose	goat	mouth		
/guːs/	/gəʊt/ (/goʊt/)	/maʊθ/		
[gu̟ˑs]	[gəo̯t] ([goo̯t])	[ma̠o̯θ]	[mɐ̟o̯θ]	[mʌo̯θ]

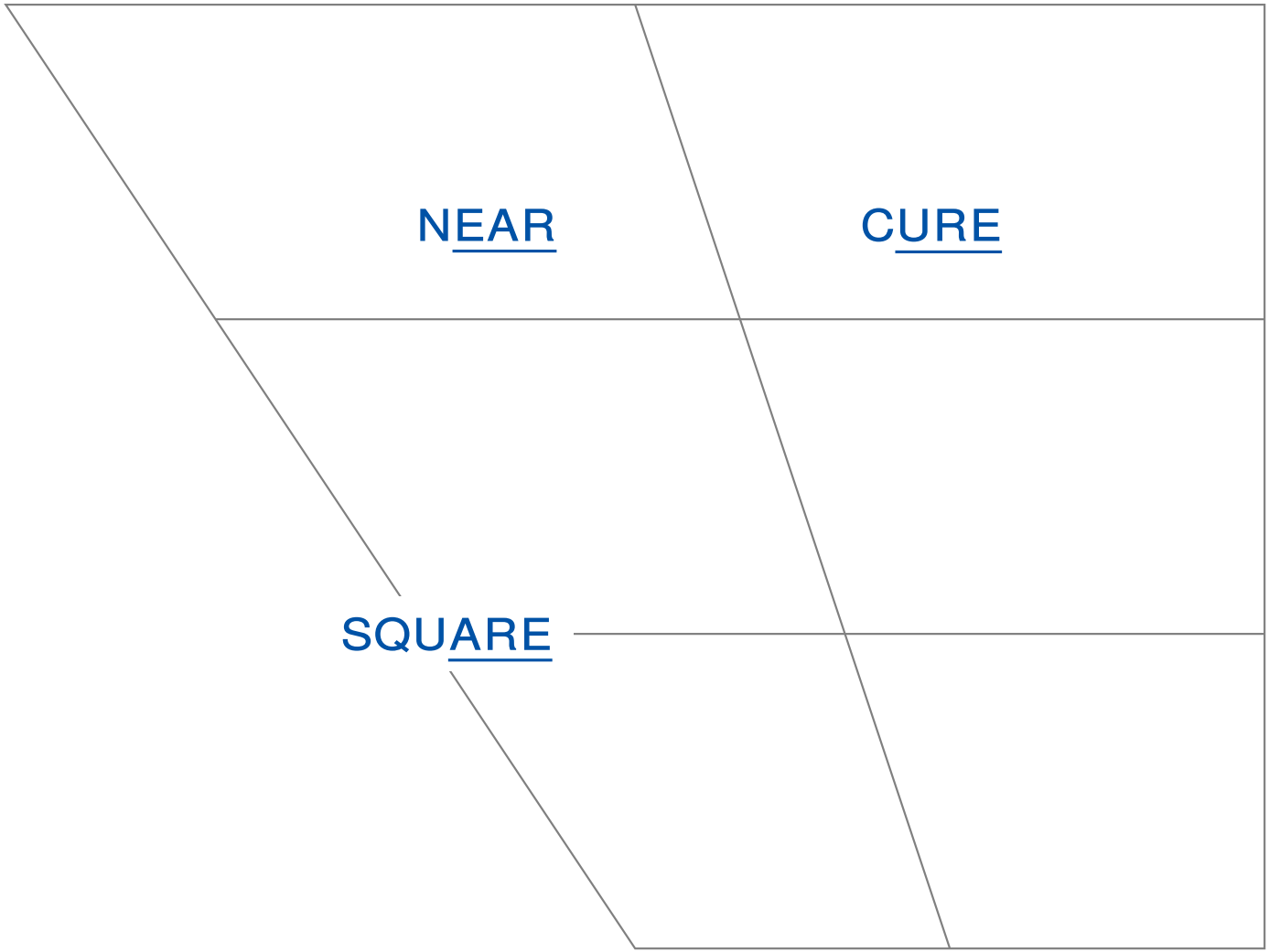
moot	mood	use (n.)	use (v.)	proof	prove
[mu̟ˑt]	[mu̟ːd]	[ju̟ˑs]	[ju̟ːz]	[pɹ̝̊u̟ˑf]	[pɹ̝̊u̟ːv]

goat	goad	dose	doze	close (n.)	close (v.)
[gəo̯t]	[gəˑo̯d]	[dəo̯s]	[dəˑo̯z]	[kləo̯s]	[kləˑo̯z]
[goo̯t]	[goˑo̯d]	[doo̯s]	[doˑo̯z]	[kloo̯s]	[kloˑo̯z]

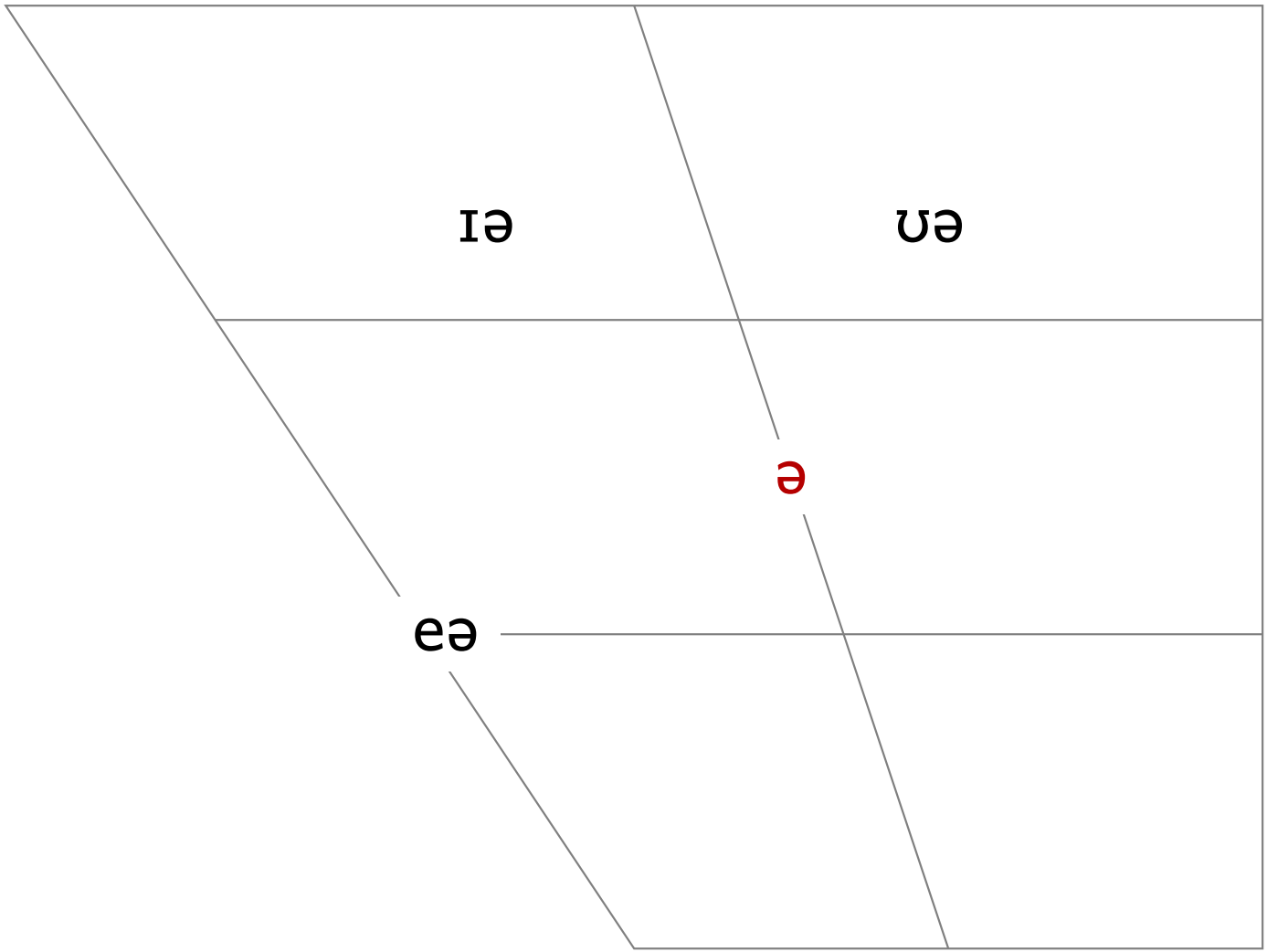
mouth (n.)	mouth (v.)	house (n.)	house (v.)	bout	bough
[ma̠o̯θ]	[ma̠ˑo̯ð]	[ha̠o̯s]	[ha̠ˑo̯z]	[ba̠o̯t]	[ba̠ˑo̯]

Whose shoe's loose? Sue knew. Hugh's tune is due in June.
(/ju:/ or /u:/ in AmE? Spoiler: is the preceding consonant alveolar?)
I suppose so. It's Flo's go. Oh no, don't go home alone.
How now, brown cow? Out out, town mouse! Clouds and showers.

English long monophthongs and diphthongs (3): lexical sets (BrE)



English long monophtongs and diphthongs (3): phonemes (BrE)



In Modern General British, /ʊə/ has become /ɔː/.
In AuE, /ʊə/ has split into two syllables: /uʷ.ə/
In Modern General British, /ɛə/ has become /ɛː/.
If a ‘system’ has only *one* term (/ɪə/), is it still a system??

English long monophthongs and diphthongs (3): examples

near	square	cure	
/nɪə̯/	/skweə̯/	/kjʊə̯/	
[nɪˑə̯]	[skwɛˑə̯]	[kjʊˑə̯]	[kjɔː]

pierce	peers	fierce	fear	weird	beard
[pʰɪə̯s]	[pʰɪˑə̯z]	[fɪəs]	[fɪˑə]	[wɪˑəd]	[bɪˑəd]

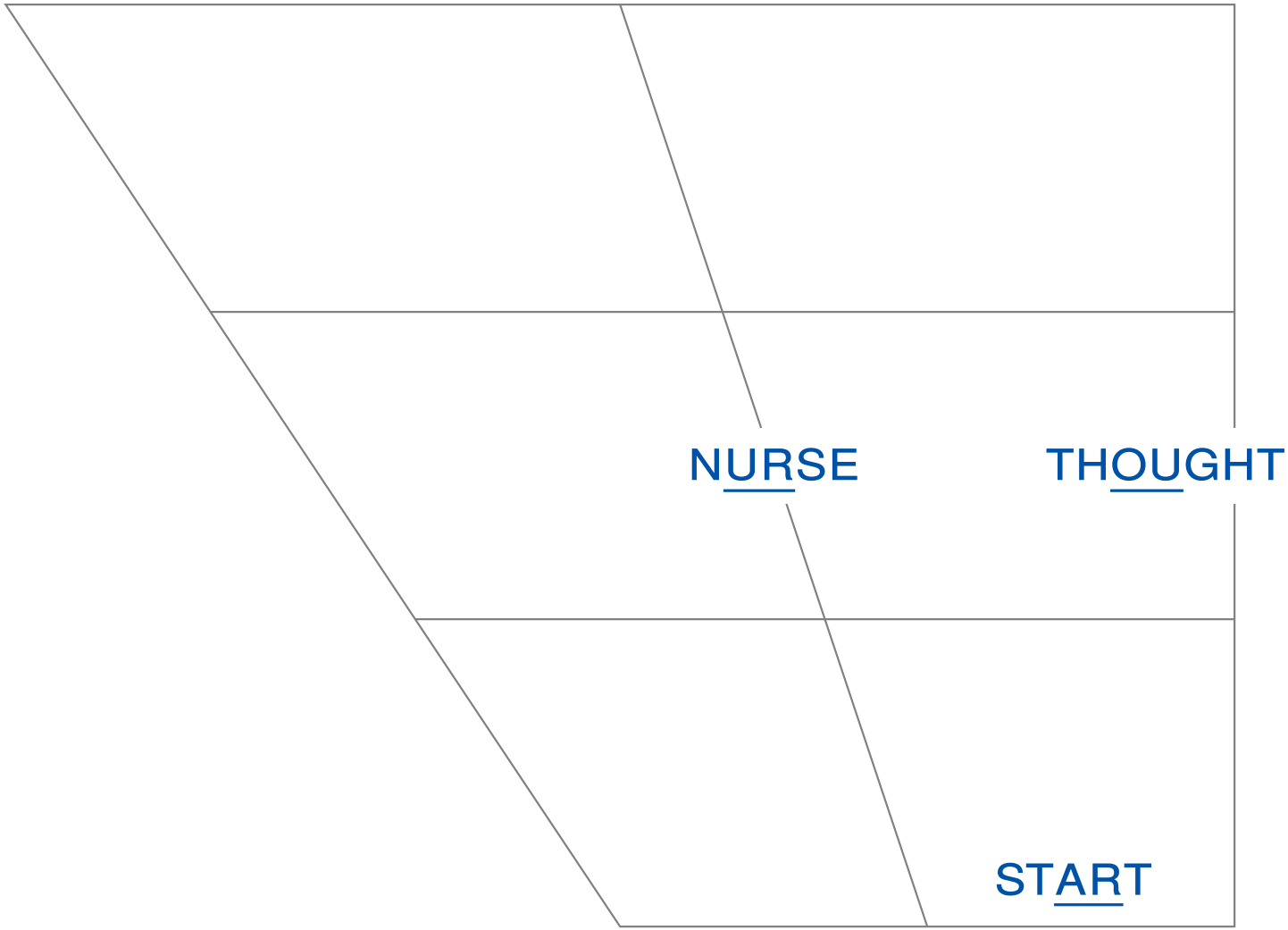
scarce	scares	there	their	they’re	mayor	prayer
[skɛə̯s]	[skɛˑə̯z]	[ðɛˑə̯]	[ðɛˑə̯]	[ðɛˑə̯]	[mɛˑə̯]	[pɻ̝ɛˑə̯]

your	you’re	sure	pure	poor	Europe
[jʊˑə̯]	[jʊˑə̯]	[ʃʊˑə̯]	[pj̝ʊˑə̯]	[pʰʊˑə̯]	[ˈjʊˑə̯ɹ̝.əp]

NB:
In American English, there are no cent(e)ring diphthongs, only vowel + r.

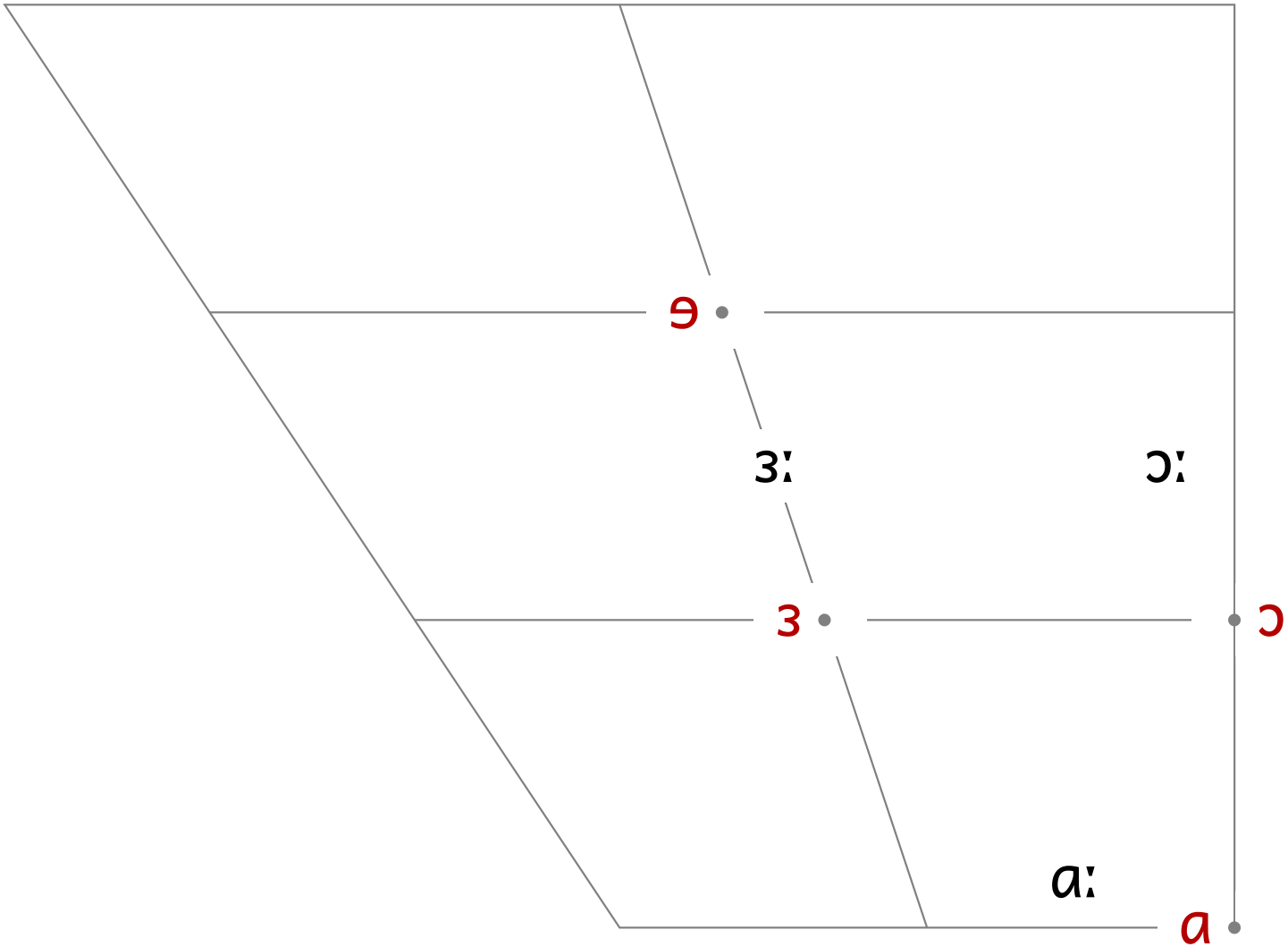
Here and there, we’re aware of Peter Pears paring a pair of pears.
Here they’re all ours; there they’re all theirs. (Try both BrE and AmE!)
Jean Ure /jʊə/ (AmE /jʊr/) was a great linguist.
Are you sure (recent BrE /ʃɔː/ ⟨Shaw⟩)? No, I’m Shakespeare!

English long monophthongs and diphthongs (4): lexical sets (BrE)



For non-rhotic varieties:
⟨fort⟩ /fɔːt/ ⟨thought⟩ /θɔːt/
⟨start⟩ /stɑːt/ ⟨bra⟩ /brɑː/
⟨nurse⟩ /nɜːs/ ⟨Moebius⟩ /mɜːbiəs/ (Does AmE have non-rhotic /ɜː/??)

English long monophthongs and diphthongs (4): phonemes (BrE)



English long monophthongs and diphthongs (4): examples

start	nurse	thought
/stɑːt/	/nɜːs/	/θɔːt/
[stɑ̟ˑt]	[nɜ̟ˑs]	[θɔ̟ˑt]

part	staff	starve	cars	bar	bra
[pʰɑˑt]	[stɑˑf]	[stɑːv]	[kɑːz]	[bɑː]	[bɹ̟ɑː]

search	surge	merch	merge	fir	prefer	fur
[sɜˑʧ]	[sɜːd͡ʒ]	[mɜˑʧ]	[mɜːd͡ʒ]	[fɜː]	[pɹ̟̈i.ˈfɜː]	[fɜː]

law	war	court	cord	course	cores	sauce	saws
[lɔ̟ː]	[wɔ̟ː]	[kʰɔ̟ˑt]	[kʰɔ̟ːd]	[kʰɔ̟ˑs]	[kʰɔ̟ːz]	[sɔ̟ˑs]	[sɔ̟ːz]

Ma parks Pa's car | last dance, last chance | a large farmyard
Percy turned, when he heard the girl's words | birds searched the earth for worms
you're four boards short | Lord Gordon caught naught | coarse gorse tore your horse

φων

The contrastive phonology of the syllable nucleus

Transatlantic relations

IPA practice

Goals

Important issues

The vowel quadrilateral and the IPA cardinal vowels

English short monophthongs

BrE and AmE vowel systems compared

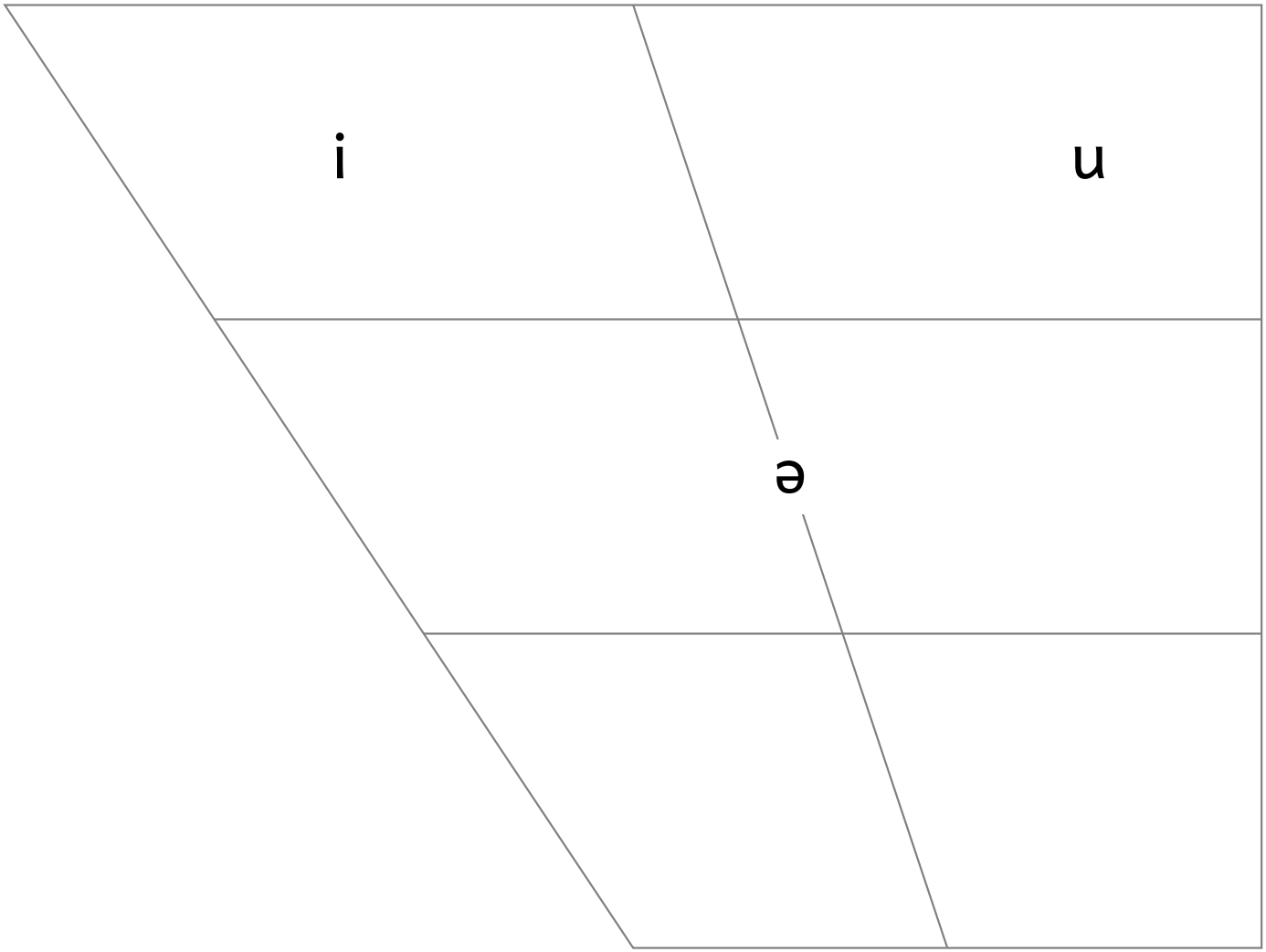
Sic transit gloria mundi

English long monophthongs and diphthongs

English reduced vowels in weak syllables

Homework ; -)

English reduced vowels in weak syllables: phonemes



(happ)y a(bout), (comm)a (infl)u(ence)

BrE (lett)er

Homework ;-)

- Read the following pages of an article by Benjamin Lee Whorf, entitled ‘Language as an Exact Science’, originally published in *Technology Review* in December 1940:
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- Are the lists complete? Are they correct?