

# Unit 8

## Vowels (3)

Some differences between English and German vowels and diphthongs

Slides for the session of  
*Phonetics with Listening Practice (British)*  
held on  
Tuesday 27 May 2025

Robert Spence  
{ English Department | LangSciTech }  
Saarland University

## English Phonetics: Unit 8:

/ˈɪŋ ɡlɪfə 'net ɪks 'ju:n ɪt 'eɪt/

## Vowels (3)

['vaʊəɪz 'θɪ:]

Some differences between English and German vowels and  
diphthongs

['sʌm 'dɪfjənsəz bæ'twi:n 'ɪŋɡlɪʃən 'dʒɜ:mən 'vaʊəɪzən 'dɪfθəŋz]

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What are these dialects?

How would American English differ?

## The goals of today's session are:

- 1 To compare and contrast the typical phonetic realizations of the vowel and diphthong phonemes of English and German

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Vowels (3)

Goals

Experiment

English vowels and  
diphthongs (schematic)

Differences  
German/English

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- ② To practise some of the English vowels and diphthongs that can be problematic to speakers of various other languages.



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- ③ To begin comparing and contrasting the vowels and diphthongs of some of the main dialects of English (such as RP, General American, Australian English, New Zealand English).



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- ④ To encourage students to explore the remaining materials in the folder

[www.spence.saar.de/courses/phoneticswithlistening/unit08\\_20251/](http://www.spence.saar.de/courses/phoneticswithlistening/unit08_20251/)



### Vowels (3)

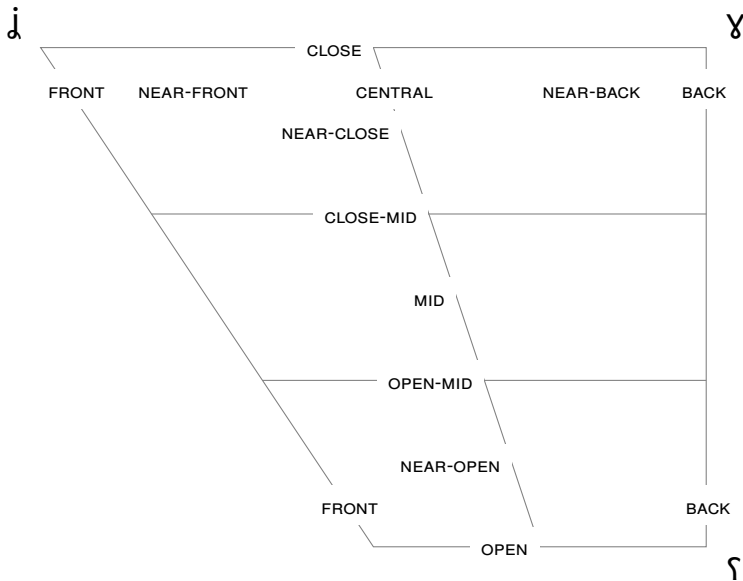
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# Vowel Quadrilateral



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Vowels (3)

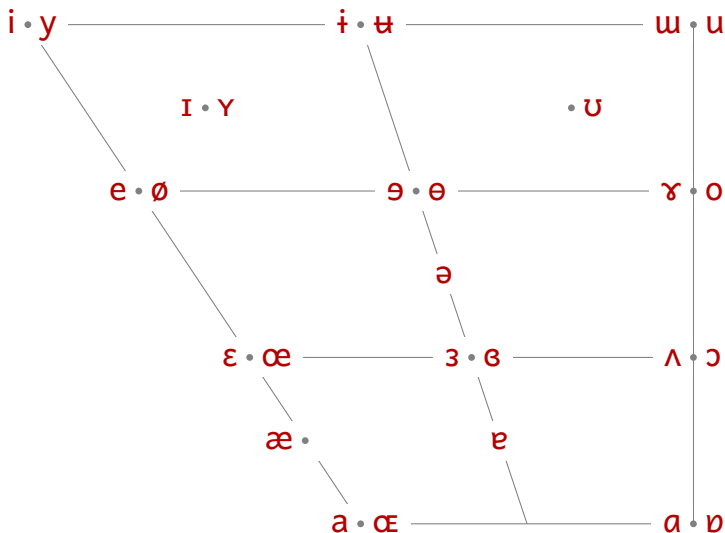
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# Cardinal Vowels



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## Slides from previous iterations of this course

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Vowels (3)

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The remaining slides are from previous iterations of this course.

- The following slides constitute a tabular list of all English vowels and diphthongs (dialect: Southern British).

## English vowels and diphthongs (schematic)

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Vowels (3)

Goals

Experiment

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- <http://westonruter.github.io/ipa-chart/keyboard/>

## Some terms and definitions (1): ‘stressed’

- A syllable can be either ‘stressed’ or ‘unstressed’, depending on where it occurs within the foot.

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- Assuming there is no ‘silent beat’, the *first* syllable in the foot (the Ictus) is ‘stressed’, all other syllables within that foot (the Remiss) are ‘unstressed’.

φων

Vowels (3)

Goals

Experiment

English vowels and  
diphthongs (schematic)

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- Example:  
/ **Arth**-ur and / **May** have / **left** for / **It**-a-ly  
— the beginning of each new foot is shown by a slash; the stressed syllables are printed in boldface type; all other syllables are unstressed.

## Some terms and definitions (2): ‘checked’ vs. ‘unchecked’ vowels/Nuclei, ‘open’ vs. ‘closed’ syllables

- A syllable consists of an Onset followed by a Rhyme; the Rhyme consists of a Nucleus followed by a Coda.

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Experiment

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  - / **Arth**-ur and / **May** have / **left** for / **It**-a-ly
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  - the syllable is ‘open’ in **May**, ‘closed’ in **Arth**, **left** and **It**.
- These factors play a significant role in determining what vowels or diphthongs can occur in a syllable...

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- If a syllable is ‘unstressed’ in English, it can (and typically does) contain a ‘reduced’ vowel — perhaps shortened in quantity, or simplified in quality, or both.

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- shortened in quantity: ⟨u⟩ [u] (not [u:]) in ⟨rubella⟩ [ru<sup>l</sup>belə] (not [ru:<sup>l</sup>belə]) (N.B.: This occurs in German, too; but the next one does not:)

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- e.g.  
[fəʊˈnetɪks fəˈɪevə] →  
[fəˈnetɪks fəˈɪevə]

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Vowels (3)

Goals

Experiment

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## Short vowels in stressed or unstressed closed syllables

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Vowels (3)

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Experiment

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Differences  
German/English

English		cf.	German	
I	ʊ		I	ʏ
e	ʌ		ɛ	œ
æ	ɒ			ɔ
				a

- All six English sounds are distinctively different, i.e. they are phonemes
- /sɪks/, /seks/, /sæks/, /sɒks/, /sʌks/, /sʊks/ are the six different words ⟨six⟩, ⟨sex⟩, ⟨sax⟩, ⟨socks⟩, ⟨sucks⟩, ⟨sooks⟩.
- We'll draw the exact locations of the phonetic realizations of these phonemes on the proper 'vowel quadrilateral' on the whiteboard; and see your handouts from Eckert and Barry (Unit 4) and the Longman Pronunciation Dictionary (Unit 5a / 5b).
- The phoneme / ʌ / varies considerably in its phonetic realization from dialect to dialect. (Why?)
- Which vowel letters can be used to write the phoneme / ʌ / in English orthography?

## Reduced short vowel(s) in unstressed open or closed syllables

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Vowels (3)

Goals

Experiment

English vowels and  
diphthongs (schematic)

Differences  
German/English

English

German

(ɪ)

ə

cf.

ə

ɐ

- Australians and Americans tend to use only the “shwa”:  
〈The wicked witch〉 (‘die böse Hexe’) [ðə 'wɪkəd 'wɪtʃ]
- Speakers of Southern British English would say:  
[ðə 'wɪkɪd 'wɪtʃ]
- Note that the German “shwa” is different from the English one.
- Compare English 〈bitter〉 ['bɪtə], German 〈bitte〉 ['bɪtə],  
German 〈bitter〉 ['bɪtɐ].

## Unchecked vowel(s) in unstressed open syllables (1)

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Vowels (3)

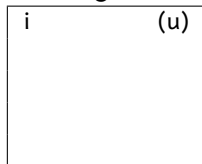
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Differences  
German/English

English



Consider the word <city>.

- Some dictionaries give the pronunciation as /'sɪtɪ/
  - This breaks the rule that /ɪ/ (like all other short vowels) can only occur in closed syllables.
  - But it does in fact correspond to the pronunciation used by many upperclass speakers of Southern British English.
- Some highschool English textbooks give the pronunciation as /'sɪti:/
  - This tends to encourage an awkward rhythm in German English-learners.
  - But it does in fact correspond to the pronunciation used in some parts of Britain.

## Unchecked vowel in unstressed open syllables (2)

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Vowels (3)

Goals

Experiment

English vowels and  
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Differences  
German/English

- The modern trend seems to be: to give the pronunciation as /'sɪti/
  - This final vowel is unchecked, and potentially tense, but nevertheless short
  - Eckert & Barry give an elegant solution by saying that the English phoneme /i:/ has two allophones, [i:] as in <beat> and [ɪ] as in <happy>

English		cf.	German		
i:	u:		i:	y:	u:
			e:	ø:	o:
	ɜ:		ɛ:		
	ɔ:				
	ɑ:			a:	

- There are no front rounded vowels in English.
- The long close vowels in English tend to be slightly diphthongized (closing diphthongs):
- The other long vowels in English tend to alternate with centering diphthongs.

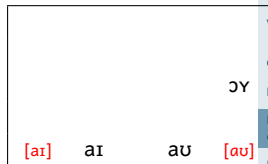
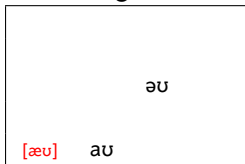
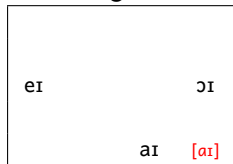
## Closing (=‘verengende’) diphthongs

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English

English

German



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- IPA symbols are placed roughly at the starting position of the diphthong, i.e. the position from which the gliding movement begins.
- /əʊ/ was originally /ou/
- its original partner /ɛʊ/ has turned into /ju:/
- with the partner absent, there's no 'pressure' on /ou/, so it can 'take up all the space' — becoming /əʊ/ (or even /eu/ !)
- Fun fact: <mew>, which for Shakespeare was the noise made by a cat (/mɛʊ/), is now the noise made by a kitten (/mju:/), e.g.: “The cat will mew, and the dog will have his day” (Hamlet V:ii:311)
- [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great\\_Vowel\\_Shift](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Vowel_Shift)



# Centering diphthongs

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Vowels (3)

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Differences  
German/English

ɪə	ʊə
eə	(ɔə)

- In most varieties of English there is no difference between /ʊə/, /ɔə/ and /ɔ:./.
- Some books write /ɛə/, others /eə/.

# Triphthongs?

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Vowels (3)

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Differences  
German/English

eɪə	əʊə	ɔɪə
aiə	auə	

- These tend to lose the middle element: /eɪə/ becomes [e(:)ə], etc.
- /aiə/ and /auə/ go one step further, turning into the monophthongs [a:] and [ɑ:]: <tire> /taɪə/ [tʰa:], <tower> /taʊə/ [tʰɑ:]
- Not everyone recognizes the existence of triphthongs; a triphthong may simply be a diphthong followed (in the next syllable) by a shwa.
- But note the difference between disyllabic <prayer> ('Betender') /'preɪ.ə/ and monosyllabic <prayer> ('Gebet') /preə/

## Differences German/English

- Now let's look in more detail at the differences between the vowels and diphthongs of English and those of German

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- Draw several empty vowel quadrilaterals.
- Consult the list of differences on your handout:  
[http://www.spence.saar.de/courses/phoneticswithlistening/unit08\\_20251/differences/EN-DE\\_3\\_Summary\\_of\\_Problems\\_for\\_German\\_Speakers.pdf](http://www.spence.saar.de/courses/phoneticswithlistening/unit08_20251/differences/EN-DE_3_Summary_of_Problems_for_German_Speakers.pdf)



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- Don't be afraid of using diacritic symbols such as [ɔ̃] [ɐ̃] [ĩ], [ï], ...consult your printout of the IPA!



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- Examine the figures on pages 111 and 149 of Eckert and Barry:  
[http://www.spence.saar.de/courses/phoneticswithlistening/unit08\\_20251/B\\_\\_EN-DE\\_Comparison/EN-DE\\_1\\_Vowels\\_Eckert\\_and\\_Barry.pdf](http://www.spence.saar.de/courses/phoneticswithlistening/unit08_20251/B__EN-DE_Comparison/EN-DE_1_Vowels_Eckert_and_Barry.pdf)  
[http://www.spence.saar.de/courses/phoneticswithlistening/unit08\\_20251/B\\_\\_EN-DE\\_Comparison/EN-DE\\_2\\_Diphthongs\\_Eckert\\_and\\_Barry.pdf](http://www.spence.saar.de/courses/phoneticswithlistening/unit08_20251/B__EN-DE_Comparison/EN-DE_2_Diphthongs_Eckert_and_Barry.pdf)
- Draw several empty vowel quadrilaterals.
- Consult the list of differences on your handout:  
[http://www.spence.saar.de/courses/phoneticswithlistening/unit08\\_20251/differences/EN-DE\\_3\\_Summary\\_of\\_Problems\\_for\\_German\\_Speakers.pdf](http://www.spence.saar.de/courses/phoneticswithlistening/unit08_20251/differences/EN-DE_3_Summary_of_Problems_for_German_Speakers.pdf)
- Don't be afraid of using diacritic symbols such as [ɔ̃] [ɐ̃] [ĩ], [ï], ...consult your printout of the IPA!
- You might also like to look at the diagrams from the Longman Pronunciation Dictionary:  
[http://www.spence.saar.de/courses/phoneticswithlistening/unit06\\_20251/B\\_\\_Handout](http://www.spence.saar.de/courses/phoneticswithlistening/unit06_20251/B__Handout)

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Vowels (3)

Goals

Experiment

English vowels and  
diphthongs (schematic)

Differences  
German/English