

Unit 4: English Diphthongs and Triphthongs

1 INTRODUCTION

This unit will undertake the description of the English diphthongs and triphthongs.

A diphthong is a glide from one pure vowel (monophthong) to another pure vowel. There are eight, but the first five are traditionally called the closing diphthongs. There are also centering diphthongs. The last part of the unit will be dedicated to a discussion of the English triphthongs.

2.OBJECTIVES

By the end of this unit, learners should be able to identify and describe the English diphthongs and the triphthongs.

3.1 Closing Diphthongs: /eɪ əʊ aɪ aʊ ɔɪ/

These diphthongs are initiated by five pure vowels, namely: /e ə æ ɑ ɔ/. They glide or move towards two hosting pure vowels, namely: /ɪ ʊ/, which happen to be closing vowels. This is why these two sets of pure vowels have given “birth” to these closing diphthongs.

13. /eɪ/

As the diphthong trapezium shows a glide that is initiated around the half-close region of the mouth ends up at a region around the close/back of the mouth. A glide such as this gives rise to the closing diphthong above. It appears as:

a in: late, Kate, day
ai in: rain, fail, wait
ei in: eight, weight, rein
ea in: great, break steak

14. /əʊ/

Like /eɪ/, this diphthong moves from the half-close position to the close and back region. It appears as:

o in: sow, oh, both
oa in: soap, road, toast
oe in: foe, hoe, toe
ou in: soul, though, shoulder

15. /aɪ/

This diphthong glides from a front open position near vowel No. 4, /æ/, as indicated in the trapezium, to the front close region where we have the hosting pure vowel no. 2, /ɪ/. Some varieties of the diphthong extend till the front back of the mouth. It appears as:

i in: time, right, wide
y in: dry, why, by
ie, ye in: lie, die, pie
igh, in: fight, light, high
eigh in: height freight
e, uy, in: eye, buy, guy

ei, ai in: either, eider, aisle

16. /aʊ/

This is a counterpart to /aɪ/ but its host to which it glides resides at the back close region. It appears as:

ou in: house, sound, plough, bough

ow in: now, cow, how

17. /ɔɪ/

This diphthong glides from the back open region to the front close region. it appears as:

oy in: boy, ploy,

oi in: noise, choice, point

uo in: buoy

3.2 The Centering Diphthongs: /ɪə əʊ ʊə/

Look at the pure vowel trapezium, locate the centre of the mouth and note a pair of pure vowels prominently located there. One of the pairs, the schwa, plays host to these four diphthongs; this is the reason they are described as centring diphthongs.

18. /ɪə/

This is a centring diphthong initiated from the front close region. It appears as:

ee, ere, ea, in: deer, dear, here, tear (Nn.)

ei, ie, i in: weird, fierce, fakir

ea, ia, eu, eo in, idea, Ian, museum, theological

19. /ɛə/

This centring diphthong is initiated at the half-close region. It appears as:

are in: care, rare, share

air in: air, fair, pair

ear in: bear, pear wear, tear (vb.)

ei, ere, a in: their, heir, there, Mary

20. /ʊə/

This diphthong begins at the close back region of the mouth and goes on to meet the host at the centre of the mouth. It appears as:

oor in: poor, moor

ure in: pure, endure cure, sure

ur in: curious, spurious during

ewer in: sewer

our in: tour, dour gourd

3.3 THE TRIPHTHONGS: /aɪə əʊə eɪəɔə/

There are glides not only from one pure vowel to another but also from the second vowel to the third, so three pure vowels are involved.

21. /aɪə/

This triphthong starts at the open region, goes to the front close region and ends at the middle of the mouth. The tongue too has a complex movement during the articulation as

it moves from the low position to the high position and finally to the neutral position.

The triphthong may appear as:

ire, (u) yre in: fire, hire, tyre, buyer, tyre

ie(r) in: tier, pliers, crier society

igher in: higher, buyer

ai in: trial, liar

iro, ion in: iron, lion, pavilion

22. /aʊə/

This triphthong also starts at the open region, moves to the back close region and ends at the middle of the mouth. The triphthong appears as:

our in: our, hour, flour

ower in: power, shower, flower

23. /eɪə/

The triphthong begins to move from the front half-close region rising slightly to the front close region then ends at the centre of the mouth. It is another complex triphthong as it involves a multiple configuration of the jaws and the lips. It appears as:

a/e-yer in: player, greyer

24. /ɔɪə/

This triphthong moves from the back close position to the front half-close region and ends at the middle of the oral cavity. It has a complex configuration, too, and appears in the following orthographical forms:

oyer in: employer

4. EXERCISES

- Describe the three centring diphthongs.
- Check the dictionary for two more examples of the closing diphthongs.
- Describe the four triphthongs.