
THE ENGLISH DIPHTHONGS

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I am supposed to be speaking about "Diphthongs in English and in Czech", but as the time is so strictly limited, and as the situation concerning English is rather complicated I must leave the Czech material aside for today and try to have a cosmic-speed look at the English diphthongs only.

As you know these phenomena have been evaluated and their nature has been explained in several different ways. Theoretically there can be the question

1. of real diphthongs, i.e. of a connection of vowel + vowel,
2. of a diphthongoid, i.e. of a connection of vocalic element + a kind of consonantal element,
3. of so-called glide vowels (or vowel glides), and
4. of vocalic elements with modifications, or, in other words, of a palatalized, centralized or velarized ending of the representatives of the single tamber categories.

So let us consider these different possibilities.

(1)—(2): Now first what in fact is the difference between what is called a "diphthong" and what is called a "diphthongoid"? I do not see any. In each case one of the elements is vocalic (or prominent in the traditional terminology), which means that it is identified in its top-phase, i.e. in its steady-state phase, the second component being then identified in its on-glide phase only, i.e. in its transition from the preceding element before the so-called proper articulation or top-phase is reached, which fact makes these non-prominent components similar to the consonantal articulations. Therefore, I do not think it necessary to make any difference between diphthongs and diphthongoids, so that these two categories fall into one. —However, placing the phenomena in question under either of these headings is contradicted first by certain tamber differences of some of the initial elements from the nearest simple vowels, and secondly by the variations of the final components that are said to be usually "not reached".—Thus the first two categories do not seem quite adequate.

As for the third possibility, i.e. considering these phenomena as gliding sounds, this does not seem to comply with reality either, because if it really were the question of a constantly changing sound, how would it be possible to identify, e.g., its beginning as an [a]-sound differing either from [A] or from [a:]. Besides, the sonagrams show

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relatively long steady-states for the first elements. Obviously this "glide vowel" view is not fully tenable either.

However, the fact remains that these phenomena are different from the so-called simple vowels, that they stand in opposition to each other as well as to the other vocalic elements of English, and, further, that their beginnings differ from their ends. Besides, it is obvious that in these phenomena there is some process going on—be it a change in the character of their single components (as, e.g., in the case of [ou > əu]) or be it a question of monophthongization (as in [ɔə > ɔ:]) or a change into another sound complex or their merging (as in the original [uə] becoming [ɔə] that later gave [ɔ:], or in [au, əu] becoming [aɪ, əi] as Mr. Eustace says in his Congress paper). And at the moment it is not quite clear, where all these changes are going to lead, whether there will occur some common trend in all the phenomena concerned or whether the members of this group will part and either merge with the other vocalic categories of form an independent new one.

Now how to evaluate this complicated situation? At this transitory period in the development of these phenomena it is rather difficult to find a large enough category to fit them all in. Therefore, the fourth theoretical possibility mentioned at the beginning, i.e., a category of vowels with modifications (or modified vowels) seems, in the given circumstances, quite an acceptable temporary means of expressing the present status.

This stand-point could also explain the somewhat different tamber of the beginnings of the first elements from those of the nearest simple vowels as well as the "not reaching of the final elements", and, further, it could explain also the so-called monophthongization. As we know the opposition between the simple vowels is primarily based on tamber. With the so-called diphthongs it would be, therefore, rather suspicious that there occurs in their first elements a third functional tamber, and, moreover, that it may vary (because usually on the contrary only those phenomena that are not fully functional suffer remarkable variations in their acoustic realizations). And, further, just as only two degrees of quantity can usually reliably function within one language system while a third degree would have to be supported by some additional sound-feature, we can suppose that with the so-called diphthongs in English it could be a question of supporting a third tamber category (occurring within each of the tamber areas) by means of a modification. So that besides the two categories of the traditionally called "short" and "long" vowels there would be established a category of let us say "modified vowels", i.e., of vowels accompanied by palatalization (for the i-diphthongs) or centralization (for the centring diphthongs) or velarization (for the u-diphthongs) respectively.

Fantastic as it may sound at first still I think that at the present stage of development of these phenomena the category of "modified vowels" is not really out of place in view of the fact that there is obviously a process going on making their former status chaotic and that we still need either for the theoretical or for the practical purposes to have some large enough category to fit in all of them.

DISCUSSION

Vachek:

Dr Skaličková's very stimulating paper has the positive features of explaining Southern British diphthongs monophonemically and, besides, of stressing that the vocalic system of ModE phonemes is in a state of flux. It appears, however, that she does not give a definite answer to our question. First, the limit separating the long and modified vowels is rather doubtful — [i:] and [u:] very frequently appears as [Ii] and [Uu]. Second, there are not binary, but often ternary or even quaternary oppositions between the short and modified vowel phonemes (e.g. [ɔ] : [ou], [ɔi], [ɔə]; [ɛ] : [ei], [ɛə], etc.).

Skaličková:

I am very sorry that I cannot fully agree with Professor Vachek. As for my not giving "a definite answer to our question"—I do not think there can be one when "the vocalic system is in a state of flux". In my paper I said that "a category of modified vowels seems, in the given circumstances, quite an acceptable temporary means of expressing the present status" (cf. above).—As far as the doubtfulness of "the limit separating the long and the modified vowels" is concerned, I am afraid that it is just the [Ii], [Uu] phonemic interpretation that is doubtful, for the so-called "inclination to diphthongation" has always been considered unfunctional in the English vocalic system, so that there is no point in regarding it as a relevant decisive feature. Moreover, according to spectrograms it seems to be rather a question of the influence of a change in the pitch occurring within the given syllable than of an independent basic shift in the formant structure comparable with that of what is usually referred to as diphthongs.—As regards the [ɔ] : [ou], [ɔi], [ɔə] and [ɛ] : [ei], [ɛə], etc. oppositions I should like to say first of all that some of the sounds in question no longer exist in these forms, [ou] having become [əu], [ɔə] having practically disappeared, and the present situation of [ɛə] not being very clear¹); secondly, I do not see any reason why the plurality of the oppositions should be considered a drawback, namely, why a simple (or "unmodified") vowel could not stand in opposition both to a palatalized and to a centralized or to a velarized type.

¹ Cf., for example, A. C. Gimson, "An Introduction to the Pronunciation of English", p. 138.