

The vowel system of Current British English

Péter Szigetvári

Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest
szigetvari@elte.hu

LingBaW 2, Lublin, 2014-11-07

the British English vowel inventory (the Jones/Gimson(/Wells) tradition)

short monophthongs/checked vowels

KIT (i/ɪ), DRESS (e), TRAP (æ), STRUT (ʌ), LOT (ɔ/ɒ), FOOT (u/ʊ)

the British English vowel inventory (the Jones/Gimson(/Wells) tradition)

short monophthongs/checked vowels

KIT (i/ɪ), DRESS (e), TRAP (æ), STRUT (ʌ), LOT (ɔ/ɒ), FOOT (u/ʊ)

long monophthongs/free vowel and R vowels

FLEECE (i:), START/BATH/PALM (ɑ:), NURSE (ə:/ɜ:),
FORCE/NORTH/THOUGHT (ɔ:), GOOSE (u:)

the British English vowel inventory (the Jones/Gimson(/Wells) tradition)

short monophthongs/checked vowels

KIT (i/ɪ), DRESS (e), TRAP (æ), STRUT (ʌ), LOT (ɔ/ɒ), FOOT (u/ʊ)

long monophthongs/free vowel and R vowels

FLEECE (i:), START/BATH/PALM (ɑ:), NURSE (ə:/ɜ:),
FORCE/NORTH/THOUGHT (ɔ:), GOOSE (u:)

diphthongs/free vowels and R vowels

FACE (ei/eɪ), PRICE (ai/aɪ), CHOICE (ɔi/ɔɪ)
GOAT (əu/əʊ), MOUTH (au/aʊ)
NEAR (iə/ɪə), SQUARE (ɛə/eə), CURE (uə/ʊə)

the British English vowel inventory (the Jones/Gimson(/Wells) tradition)

short monophthongs/checked vowels

KIT (i/ɪ), DRESS (e), TRAP (æ), STRUT (ʌ), LOT (ɔ/ɒ), FOOT (u/ʊ)

long monophthongs/free vowel and R vowels

FLEECE (i:), START/BATH/PALM (ɑ:), NURSE (ə:/ɜ:),
FORCE/NORTH/THOUGHT (ɔ:), GOOSE (u:)

diphthongs/free vowels and R vowels

FACE (ei/eɪ), PRICE (ai/aɪ), CHOICE (ɔi/ɔɪ)
GOAT (əu/əʊ), MOUTH (au/aʊ)
NEAR (iə/ɪə), SQUARE (ɛə/eə), CURE (uə/ʊə)

unstressed

comma/letter (ə)

the vowels under scrutiny: “centring diphthongs”

short monophthongs/checked vowels

KIT (i/ɪ), DRESS (e), TRAP (æ), STRUT (ʌ), LOT (ɔ/ɒ), FOOT (u/ʊ)

long monophthongs/free vowels and R vowels

FLEECE (i:), START/BATH/PALM (ɑ:), NURSE (ə:/ɜ:),
FORCE/NORTH/THOUGHT (ɔ:), GOOSE (u:)

diphthongs/free vowels and R vowels

FACE (ei/eɪ), PRICE (ai/aɪ), CHOICE (ɔi/ɔɪ)
GOAT (əu/əʊ), MOUTH (au/aʊ)
NEAR (iə/ɪə), SQUARE (ɛə/eə), CURE (uə/ʊə)

unstressed

comma/letter (ə)

the vowels under scrutiny: high “long monophthongs”

short monophthongs/checked vowels

KIT (i/ɪ), DRESS (e), TRAP (æ), STRUT (ʌ), LOT (ɔ/ɒ), FOOT (u/ʊ)

long monophthongs/free vowels and R vowels

FLEECE (i:), START/BATH/PALM (ɑ:), NURSE (ə:/ɜ:),
FORCE/NORTH/THOUGHT (ɔ:), GOOSE (u:)

diphthongs/free vowels and R vowels

FACE (ei/eɪ), PRICE (ai/aɪ), CHOICE (ɔi/ɔɪ)
GOAT (əu/əʊ), MOUTH (au/aʊ)
NEAR (iə/ɪə), SQUARE (ɛə/eə), CURE (uə/ʊə)

unstressed

comma/letter (ə)

Jones 1960: 113

“Some of these words [*ear, beard, here, weird*, etc] have alternative pronunciations with jə:”

Jones 1960: 113

“Some of these words [*ear, beard, here, weird*, etc] have alternative pronunciations with $j\text{ə}$.”

Wells 1982: 361

“The more conservative northern accents [...] use disyllabic or varisyllabic pronunciations of the type $[f\text{i}:\text{ə}]$ *fear*, $[b\text{i}:\text{ə}]$ *beer*, which is best regarded as a phonemic sequence $/i:\text{ə}/$. Word-internally before $/r/$, in words such as *serious, period*, these accents usually have simple $/i:/$ with no following $/\text{ə}/$.”

Jones 1960: 113

“Some of these words [*ear, beard, here, weird*, etc] have alternative pronunciations with $jə$:”

Wells 1982: 361

“The more conservative northern accents [...] use disyllabic or varisyllabic pronunciations of the type $[fi:ə]$ *fear*, $[bi:ə]$ *beer*, which is best regarded as a phonemic sequence $/i:ə/$. Word-internally before $/r/$, in words such as *serious, period*, these accents usually have simple $/i:/$ with no following $/ə/$.”

Wells 2008: 173

“Compression[: ... before schwa] a long vowel or diphthong changes: $i:$ becomes $ɪ$ [...]”

Jones 1960: 113

“εə, as I pronounce it, is a diphthong...”

Jones 1960: 113

“εə, as I pronounce it, is a diphthong...”

Gimson 1989: 144

“[a]nother form of advanced RP uses a pure long vowel [ε:] [...] especially in a non-final syllable, e.g. *careful*”

Jones 1960: 113

“ $\varepsilon\theta$, as I pronounce it, is a diphthong...”

Gimson 1989: 144

“[a]nother form of advanced RP uses a pure long vowel [ɛ:] [...] especially in a non-final syllable, e.g. *careful*”

Wells 1982: 157

“RP / $\varepsilon\theta$ / often involves very little diphthongal movement [...] [i]n much English and southern-hemisphere speech, and in Wales, the opposition exemplified by *shed* vs. *shared* is one of duration rather than quality, [ʃ ε d] vs. [ʃ ε :d] etc.”

Jones 1960: 116

“many speakers of Received English, myself among them, do not use the diphthong ɔə at all, but replace it always with ɔ: ”

on CURE and *jewel*

Jones 1960: 117

Jones 1960: 117

- ▶ two categories: spelled (a) with *r*, (b) without *r*

Jones 1960: 117

- ▶ two categories: spelled (a) with *r*, (b) without *r*
- ▶ category (a), eg *cure*: $ʊə \rightarrow ɔə \rightarrow ɔː$

Jones 1960: 117

- ▶ two categories: spelled (a) with *r*, (b) without *r*
- ▶ category (a), eg *cure*: $\text{ʊə} \rightarrow \text{ɔə} \rightarrow \text{ɔː}$
- ▶ category (b), eg *jewel*: $\text{ʊə} \rightarrow \text{uə}$

Jones 1960: 117

- ▶ two categories: spelled (a) with *r*, (b) without *r*
- ▶ category (a), eg *cure*: $\text{ʊə} \rightarrow \text{ɔə} \rightarrow \text{ɔː}$
- ▶ category (b), eg *jewel*: $\text{ʊə} \rightarrow \text{uə}$
- ▶ Lindsey (2013): these could never have been merged

on CURE and *jewel*

Jones 1960: 117

- ▶ two categories: spelled (a) with *r*, (b) without *r*
- ▶ category (a), eg *cure*: $ʊə \rightarrow ɔə \rightarrow ɔː$
- ▶ category (b), eg *jewel*: $ʊə \rightarrow uːə$
- ▶ Lindsey (2013): these could never have been merged

Gimson 1989: 146

monophthongization to $ɔː$ is an option after *j*

on CURE and *jewel*

Jones 1960: 117

- ▶ two categories: spelled (a) with *r*, (b) without *r*
- ▶ category (a), eg *cure*: $\text{ʊə} \rightarrow \text{ɔə} \rightarrow \text{ɔː}$
- ▶ category (b), eg *jewel*: $\text{ʊə} \rightarrow \text{uə}$
- ▶ Lindsey (2013): these could never have been merged

Gimson 1989: 146

monophthongization to ɔː is an option after *j*

Wells 2008

jury ɟʊəri ɟɜːri ɟɔːri

Jones 1960: 65f

“Many English people use a diphthong in place of a pure i:. The diphthong begins with an open variety of i and moves to a closer position; it may be represented by ij̣ or ui or ij [...] [a]n exaggerated diphthongal pronunciation sounds dialectal, an extreme form of the diphthong being used in the local dialect of London (Cockney)”

Jones 1960: 65f

“Many English people use a diphthong in place of a pure i:. The diphthong begins with an open variety of i and moves to a closer position; it may be represented by ij̩ or ui or ij [...] [a]n exaggerated diphthongal pronunciation sounds dialectal, an extreme form of the diphthong being used in the local dialect of London (Cockney)”

Gimson 1989: 101f

“[t]he vowel is often noticeably diphthongized, especially in final positions. A slight glide from a position near to [ɪ] is common amongst RP speakers, being more usual than a pure vowel”

Jones 1960: 85

“Many English people diphthongize slightly the sound u:, especially when final. The diphthongization takes the form of a gradual increase of the lip-rounding; it may be symbolized phonetically by $u\bar{u}$, ωu , or uw .”

Jones 1960: 85

“Many English people diphthongize slightly the sound u:, especially when final. The diphthongization takes the form of a gradual increase of the lip-rounding; it may be symbolized phonetically by uu , ou , or uw .”

Gimson 1989: 121

“Just as RP /i:/ is rarely pure, so RP /u:/ is usually diphthongized, [ʊu] or [uw], especially in final position.”

vowel phonotactics

—C	—#	—V
----	----	----

vowel phonotactics

	__C	__#	__V
A I e æ ʌ ɒ ʊ	✓	✗	✗

A checked vowels: short monophthongs except schwa

vowel phonotactics

	__C	__#	__V
A I e æ ʌ ɒ ʊ	✓	✗	✗
B ɑ: ɔ: ɜ: ə Iə eə ʊə	✓	✓	✗

A checked vowels: short monophthongs except schwa

B R vowels: *three* long monophthongs + schwa + *three* diphthongs

vowel phonotactics

	__C	__#	__V
A I e æ ʌ ɒ ʊ	✓	✗	✗
B ɑ: ɔ: ɜ: ə ɪə eə ʊə	✓	✓	✗
C i: eɪ aɪ ɔɪ aʊ əʊ u:	✓	✓	✓

A checked vowels: short monophthongs except schwa

B R vowels: *three* long monophthongs + schwa + *three* diphthongs

C free vowels: *two* long monophthongs + *five* diphthongs

the proposal

FLEECE and GOOSE

are diphthongs: /flɪs/ and /gəʊs/

the proposal

FLEECE and GOOSE

are diphthongs: /fi:is/ and /gəʊs/

NEAR, SQUARE, and CURE

are monophthongs: /nɪ:/, /skwɛ:/, and /kjə:/ or /kjɔ:/

the proposal

FLEECE and GOOSE

are diphthongs: /fi:is/ and /gəʊs/

NEAR, SQUARE, and CURE

are monophthongs: /ni:/, /skwɛ:/, and /kjə:/ or /kjɔ:/

especially word finally

NEAR may have a bisyllabic pronunciation: /niə/

the proposal

FLEECE and GOOSE

are diphthongs: /fi:is/ and /gəʊs/

NEAR, SQUARE, and CURE

are monophthongs: /nɪ:/, /skwɛ:/, and /kjə:/ or /kjɔ:/

especially word finally

NEAR may have a bisyllabic pronunciation: /niə/

cf *here it is* /hɪ:r it ɪz/ vs *it's here* /ɪts hɪ:/ or /ɪts hiə/

consequences (once again)

checked vowels (only __C)

are the short monophthongs (except schwa)

consequences (once again)

checked vowels (only __C)

are the short monophthongs (except schwa)

R vowels (__C and __#, but * __V)

are the long monophthongs and schwa

consequences (once again)

checked vowels (only __C)

are the short monophthongs (except schwa)

R vowels (__C and __#, but * __V)

are the long monophthongs and schwa

free vowels (anywhere)

are the diphthongs

pre-R “long” vowels

	no R influence	“input”	compression/smoothing old	new
	free vowel	free V+ə	centring diphthong	long monophth.
NEAR		i:ə	ɪə	ɪ:
CURE		ʊu.ə	ʊə/ɔə	ɔ:/ɔ:/ɜ:
SQUARE		ɛi.ə	ɛə	ɛ:
FORCE		əʊ.ə	ɔə	ɔ:
<i>fire</i>		ai.ə	aə	a:
<i>hour</i>		au.ə	aə	a:
<i>hero</i>	i		ɪə	ɪ:
<i>fury</i>	əu		ʊə	ɔ:/ɜ:
<i>dairy</i>			ɛə	ɛ:
<i>glory</i>			ɔə	ɔ:
<i>virus</i>	ai			a:
<i>dowry</i>	au			a:

further categories

	__CC	stressed
B1 $\alpha:$ $\upsilon:$ $\text{ʒ}:$	✓	✓
B2 ə	✓	✗
B3 $\text{ɪ}:$ $\text{ɛ}:$ $\text{ə}:$	✗	✓

the vowel inventory of Current British English

		__CC	__C	__#	__V	str.d	
checked	ɪ ɛ ʌ ɔ ə ʊ	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	
R vowels	broad	ɑː ɔː əː	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓
	schwa	ə	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗
	smooth	ɪː ɛː ʊː	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓
free	ɪ i ɛ i ɑ i ɔ i aʊ əʊ ɰ u	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	

the vowel inventory of Current British English

		__CC	__C	__#	__V	str.d
checked	ɪ ɛ ʌ ɔ ʊ ɒ	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓
	broad ɑː ɔː əː	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓
R vowels	schwa ə	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗
	smooth ɪː ɛː ɔː	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓
free	ɪ i ɛ i ɑ i ɔ i ʌ u ɐ u	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

the vowel inventory of Current British English

		__CC	__C	__#	__V	str.d
checked	ɪ ɛ ʌ ɔ ə ʊ	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓
R vowels	broad ɑː ɔː əː	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓
	schwa ə	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗
	smooth ɪː ɛː ʊː	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓
free	ɪ i ɛ i ɑ i ɔ i ʌ u ɐ u	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

the vowel inventory of Current British English

		__CC	__C	__#	__V	str.d
checked	ɪ ɛ ʌ ɔ ʊ	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓
R vowels	broad	ɑː ɔː ɛː	✓	✓	✗	✓
	schwa	ə	✓	✓	✗	✗
	smooth	ɪː ɛː ɜː	✗	✓	✓	✓
free	ɪi ɛi ɑi oi au əu ɯu	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

correspondences

- ▶ checked vowels = short monophthongs (except schwa)
- ▶ broad vowels = nonhigh and nonfront long monophthongs
- ▶ smooth vowels = high or front long monophthongs
- ▶ free vowels = diphthongs

acknowledgements & references

Many of the transcription symbols were proposed by *Geoff Lindsey* at englishspeechservices.com/blog/british-vowels, with whom I developed the CUBE dictionary (seas3.elte.hu/cube). I was supported by *OTKA* (the Hungarian Science Research Fund).

references

- ▶ Gimson, Alfred Charles. 1989. *An Introduction to the Pronunciation of English* (4th ed., revised by Susan Ramsaran). London: Edward Arnold.
- ▶ Jones, Daniel. 1960. *An Outline of English Phonetics* (9th ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- ▶ Lindsey, Geoff. 2013. The merger that never quite was. Posted 2013-10-02, retrieved 2014-09-21 from englishspeechservices.com/blog/the-merger-that-never-quite-was
- ▶ Wells, John Christopher. 1982. *Accents of English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- ▶ Wells, John Christopher. 2008. *Longman Pronunciation Dictionary* (3rd ed.). Harlow: Pearson Longman.