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 **Diphtongs**

a) DEFINITION

According to Roach (1991), “RP has a large number of **diphthongs**, sounds which consist of a movement or **glide** from one vowel to another… In terms of length, diphthongs are like … long vowels… Perhaps the most important thing to remember about all the diphthongs is that the first part is much longer and stronger than the second part… the total number of diphthongs is eight.”

For Cruttenden (1994), diphthongs are “those vocalic elements which form a glide within one syllable. They may be said to have a first element (the starting point) and a second element (the point in the direction of which the glide is made.”

b) CLASSIFICATION OF DIPHTHONGS

Diphthongs can be classified into two groups, according to the height or part of the tongue of the last element: *Closing* and *Centring* diphthongs.

The first element in a closing diphthong is opener than the final close element. In a centring diphthong, the first element is either a front or back vowel and the last element is central (“schwa”).

Auditorily, diphthongs may also be termed as either rising or falling. Falling diphthongs consist of two elements and the first element is more prominent than the second. In rising diphthongs, the second element is more prominent. English diphthongs are all falling.

The RP diphthongs have as their first element sounds in the general region of ɪ, e, a, ə, u and for their second element ɪ, ʊ, ə.

Diphthongs may also undergo clipping, i.e. shortening, when followed by a voiceless sound.

c) DESCRIPTION OF DIPHTHONGS

 /eɪ/

This diphthong starts in a position between cardinal vowels ɛ and eto the vowel sound ɪ. The lips are spread.

Examples of this sound are: ape, name

 /aɪ /

The starting point of this diphthong is nearer to than . The lips move from a neutral to lightly spread position.

Examples of this sound are: light, might

 /ɔɪ/

With a starting point nearer ɔthan ɒ, and ending near ɪ. The lips may change from a rounded or to a slightly spread position.

Examples of this sound are: boil, join

 /əʊ/

This diphthong starts in the position for schwa and then glides towards ʊ. The lips change from a neutral to a rounded position.

Examples of this sound are: alone

 aʊ/

For the production of this sound, a more centralized back part of the tongue, as for ɑ, initiates the glide. The finishing point of this diphthong does not completely reach the ʊ area. The lips are slightly rounded.

Examples of this sound are: how, cow

 /ɪə/

When pronouncing this phoneme, the back part of the tongue is used, with a close approximation to Cardinal Vowel N° 5, although the lip rounding for this sound makes the difference. The tongue is raised above the open position and no contact is made between the tongue rims and the upper molars. This phoneme is not part of the phonemic inventory of AmE, in which it is replaced by either the cardinal sound ɑ or the sound ɔː.

This sound is considered to be relatively short.

Examples of this sound are: hear, here

 / eə/

For the production of this diphthong, the starting point is a vowel in the half open front position and moving almost horizontally to the opener variety of schwa when in final position and a closer position when followed by a consonant. The lips are neutrally open throughout. “Nowadays a long monophthong ɛː is a completely acceptable alternative in General RP.” (Cruttenden: 1994)

Examples of this sound are: her , air

 /ʊə/

The diphthong glides from a half close position to a more open variant of schwa. The lips are neutrally rounded at the beginning, becoming spread in the final element. This diphthong is nowadays being levelled to ɔː by many speakers.

Examples of this sound are: security , poor