# *The Iraqi Learners' Perceptibility of RP Crescendo Diphthongs*

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## *Abstract*

To perceive the RP speakers phonetic diphthongisation would be a simple encoding and decoding process, i.e. not only the English simple short vowels glide to one another to produce diphthongs, but also the semi-vowels (hence the phonemes) /w/ and /j/ do. The latter seem to glide in mono -and polly - syllables thus , /w/ and /j/ glide have been a dilemma to the learners' perceptibility of this phonological phenomena.

This paper is meant to tackle the Iraqi postgraduates' perceptibility in crescendo diphthongs. Twelve postgraduates (MA linguistics) have been asked to select the appropriate transcribed utterances out of orthographic items chosen from textbooks and BBC world programs. Hence, a questionnaire is designed to cope with the requirement of this paper[1].

(1) The learners have had the chance to study phonetics & phonology theoretically; nowadays they have the opportunities to listen to and watch BBC, and they have been given items to check them there. The transcribed options have emphasised on compression and crescendo diphthongs more than other allophonic variations. This is to show the limits of piece of work. Moreover, the options have been given various transcriptions to fulfill the needs of the work.

## *Introduction*

One of the striking concepts of the English sound system is the flexibility of pronouncing the English short vowels and diphthongs.

Roach (2000:21) elucidates that these short vowels are classified into pure vowels and glides, the latter are the RP diphthongs. In terms of length, diphthongs are like the long vowels, i.e. the first part is much longer and stronger them the second part, for example, most of the diphthongs /aI/ consists of the /a/ vowel, and only in about the last quarter of the diphthong does the glide to /ɪ/ become noticeable. As the glide to/I/ become noticeable. As the glide to/ɪ/ happens, the loudness of the second decreases. As a result, the part of /ɪ/ is shorter and quieter. The total number of diphthongs is eight, they are divided into: centering and closing, the former end with /ə/as in /iə/, /eə./ and /ʊə./, the latter end either in/ɪ/ as in /e i /, /a i/, /ɹi/, or in / ʊ / as in /ə ʊ ./ and /a ʊ./.

## The Nature of the Phonemes /w/ and /j/ : a Phonetic Overview.

Generally, constants are classified according to place of articulation, manner of articulation, and voicing. The consonants /w/ and /j/ have been phonetically verified as semi – vowels; Roach (2000:64)and Wells (1990:41) pinpoint that from the phonetic point of view the articulation of /j/ is practically the same as that of a front close vowel such as /i:/, but is very short. In the same way /w/ is closely similar to /u:/, hence [i & u] respectively [(2)]. Specifically, the articulation of the palatal /j/ is by raising the front of the body of the tongue towards the hard palatal; the labial-velar/w/

is articulated by raising the back of the tongue towards the soft palate and rounding the lips.

(2) The neutralised [i] & [u] are the result of canceling a phonemic opposition certain positions ( Hartman & Stork,1946:51)

## The Phonological Nature of /w/ and /j/.

On the basis of such phonetic inventory, the phonological process of diphthongs is set up to verify the conditioning realisations of these phonemes, i.e., the phonological environment specifies that these voiced phonemes /w/ and /j/ have attained the flexibility to be pronounced as crescendo diphthongs.

Wells (op.cit.:175 ) defines and gives the phonotactics related to a crescendo diphthong; a crescendo diphthong is one in which the prominence increases as there is a pass from the first element to the second, all English diphthongs are diminuendo (falling) diphthongs, e.g., in nice [ na'ɪs] the prominence decreases as there is a pass from [a] to [ɪ]. No English phoneme has a crescendo diphthong as its usual phonetic realisation. Nevertheless, crescendo diphthongs may arise in one of two ways:

1- a semivowel /j/ or /w/ is followed by a vowel. In the words yes [ j'es] and win [w'ɪn ], the sequences represented by [ je] and [wi] could be regarded as crescendo diphthongs.

2- if lenient [ li':ni∂nt] is compressed(3) from three syllables to two, there are actually two distinct possible outcomes. Rather then changing all the way to the corresponding semivowel [j] (giving [li:nj∂nt ]), the [i] may merely come to form the less prominent part of a crescendo diphthong [i∂] thus[ li: nj∂nt]. Similarly, influence [influ∂ns] rather than becoming [ inflwens], may be pronounced with a crescendo diphthong[u∂], thus [ influ∂ns]. This is particularly likely if a semivowel would give rise to a difficult sequence of consonants, as in glorious [glɹ:ri ∂s} where / rj/ is awkward. (op. cit.).

(3) Compression is the reduction of two syllables into one with in a word (Chalker & Weiner, 1994:81).

Grabe (1998:131) describes English as a compressing language par excellence; sometimes a sequence of sounds in English has two possible pronunciations: either as two separate syllables, or compressed into a single syllable. The compressed pronunciation is more usual in frequently – used words; in fast or casual speech; and if the word has already been used in the discourse (Wells, op.cit.:152 ).

The compressed syllables are clarified in relation to presenting an articulatory definition of a syllable, which may include a number of variables with jaw opening as but one of the indicators of syllable. Generally speaking, the jaw moves to a greater or lesser degree depending on the phonological function of the syllable, to control the prominence of each syllable and demarcate the individual syllables in speech. In other words, the jaw's opening and closing cycle is viewed as providing a syllabic feature for speech organisation. There is an intuitive sense that the jaw opening – closing cycle may participate as a sort of syllable – counter. (Erickson, 1998:147).

An important phonetic feature of the English syllable is that a heavy syllable will have as its center one of the vowel phonemes but not /ə/ . Light syllables, on the other hand, can only have four types of center:

1) the vowel / ə/.;
2) a close front unrounded vowel in the general are of /i:/ and /ɪ/,
3) a close back rounded vowel in the general are of /u:/ and /ʊ /,
4) a syllabic consonant.

The comparison between weak syllables containing vowels with strong syllables reveals that the vowel in a weak syllable tends to be shorter, of lower intensity and different in quality. (Roach, op.cit.:82).

Such phonetic view verifies the phonological observation of the glides, i.e., the /w/ and /j/ are the most – vowel – like (the weakest phonemes). (Hawkins, 1984:135).

## Questionnaire

Select the most: appropriate pronunciation from the following options to represent the, RP crescendo diphthongs for each item:

1) yes

a) [ jes] b) [jeis] c) [ jes] d) [j:es].

2) win

a)[win] b)[win] c) [w:in] d) [wi:n].

3) lenient:

a) [li:nj∂nt] b) [li:ni∂nt] c) [linj∂nt] d) [li:ni∂nt].

4) influenza:

a)[influ∂nz∂] b)[influ∂nz∂] c)[influænz∂] d)[inflwænz∂].

5) glorious:

a)[glɹ:r∂s] b)[glɹ:ri∂s] c) [glɹ:ri∂s] d) [gloj∂s]

6) crier

a)[krai∂] b)[kraj∂] c) [krai∂] d) [kræi∂]

7) crick howell

a)[krikhau∂l] b)[krikhaw∂l] c)[krikhæw∂l] d)[krikhau∂l].

8) appreciate

a)[ɔ̃pri:ɕjeit] b)[ɔ̃priçieit] c) [æpriçi:eit] d) [ɔ̃pri:çieit].

9) firework

a)[fajɔ̃wɔ̃:k] b)[faiɔ̃wɔ̃:k] c)[faiɔ̃wɔ̃:k] d)[fæjerwɔ̃:k].

10) hilarious

a)[hilɔ̃rjɔ̃s] b)[hileɔ̃riɔ̃s] c)[hileɔ̃riɔ̃s] d)[hi:leɔ̃riɔ̃s]

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a)[kɒmpju:teiçn] b)[kɒmpjuteiçn] c)[kɒmpu:teiçn] d)[kɒmpjuteiçn]

12) evacuation

a)[iva:kweiçn] b)[ivækjueiçn] c)[ivækueiçn] d)[ivækjueiçn][4]

(4) possible compression of adjacent syllables (LPD).

## Items Analysis

In order to catch the students' perception of crescendo diphthongs within the domain of listening comprehension, there have been intralingual errors.

These errors fluctuate from one item to another. They are as follows[5]:

The percentages of the mono- syllables are:

1) Item 1 50%
2) Item 2 25%
3) Item 6 25%

The percentages of the polly- syllables are:

1) Item 4 34%
2) Item 3 25%
3) Item 7 16%
4) Item 11 16%
5) Item 5 8%
6) Item 8 zero
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Such fluctuation of the more- and polly- syllables as Sendlmeier (1995: 137f) assumes is due to the fact that adult speaker- listener has several kinds of mental representation at the phonetic level at one's disposal simultaneously. The most important of these are: the word, the syllable, the phoneme and the phonetic feature. These different units are different kinds of representation within are level, i.e., the phonetic level.

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(5) Thanks are due to Miss. Nargis (The Internet Unit-College of Languages) for carrying out the statistics of this work.

Using the phoneme monitoring technique, Cutler et al. (1987b) observe that listeners detect a target phoneme faster when it occurs in a mono- syllabic word receiving sentence stress than when the syllable is unstressed. Auer (1993) comments on word recognition that the words with high probability phonetic patterns are processed more rapidly than those with low probability patterns (Vitevitch, et al: 1997:49).

The low probability patterns are those that are referred to polysyllables, i.e., in most spoken languages, few cues are available to signal exactly where one word ends and the next begins. However, the comprehension of spoken language must involve processing discrete words, rather than utterances as indivisible wholes, because most completes utterances have never previously been experienced by the listeners to whom they are directed. To understand an utterance, therefore, listeners must somehow, very often in the absence of explicit signals, locate the boundaries between the individual words of which the utterance is composed. The most accurately located word boundaries are those falling after a consonant and before a vowel. Moreover, listeners might in fact adopt a universally a applicable solution to the word- boundary problem in that, to solve it, they exploit whatever rhythmic structure happens to characterise their language. (Cutler,et al:1997:145ff)

A theory of comprehension, then, will map the imput- the signals that reach the ear or the eye- to the output, the symbolic representation of what has been read or heard. One side of the problem is relatively definable: it is known what signals cause the eardrums to wiggle or the cones to fire. But the other side, the symbolic representation, is still cause for considerable contention, i.e., comprehension is symbolic where transformations operate between signal and symbol. (Foss, 1997:193f).

## Conclusion

It is of considerable importance to realise that listening to RP speakers, and comprehending the phonological processes of crescendo diphthongs is not an easy task. The learners' feed- back of diphthongs has made them cope, in one way or another, the phonotactics of crescendo diphthongs. The choices, these learners have made, reveal the familiarity of the utterance itself, i.e., their knowledge of the utterance is alluded to mono- syllables as well as polly- syllables. In other words, it is their automatic perception to submit the appropriate and precise options. This is because they have been so keen to be native- like, other wise, there are problematic choices.

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