

PAPER

STRUCTURAL AND FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS OF DIPHTHONGS IN THE ENGLISH PHONETIC SYSTEM

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Abstract

This article analyses the structural and functional features of diphthongs in the English phonetic system. The study focuses on their articulatory movement and phonological status, highlighting their role in pronunciation and meaning distinction. The findings are relevant for phonetic theory and the practice of teaching English pronunciation.

Key words: diphthongs, English phonetics, vocalic system, articulation, phonological function

The English vowel system is notable for its richness and complexity, largely due to the presence of diphthongs, which function as dynamic vocalic units. Unlike monophthongs, produced with relatively stable articulatory positions, diphthongs involve a noticeable movement of the speech organs within a single syllable. This articulatory glide creates a gradual transition between vowel qualities, as exemplified by the pronunciation of face [feɪs], where the vowel begins in a mid-front position and moves toward a higher front quality.

From a theoretical perspective, diphthongs are treated as indivisible phonemic units rather than simple combinations of two vowels. This view is supported by phonological evidence, including their behavior in syllabification and stress patterns. For

instance, in the word time [taɪm], the diphthong occupies a single syllabic nucleus and cannot be split without altering the phonological structure of the word. Such examples demonstrate that diphthongs function as coherent units within the English phonetic system.

Structurally, English diphthongs consist of two main components: the nucleus and the glide. The nucleus represents the starting point of articulation and carries greater prominence, while the glide reflects the directional movement toward another vowel quality. In house [haʊs], articulation begins with an open front vowel and gradually shifts toward a near-close back vowel, forming a smooth and continuous transition. This internal structure differentiates diphthongs from long monophthongs

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such as the vowel in car [k:] where no articulatory movement occurs.

English diphthongs are commonly classified into closing and centring types. Closing diphthongs involve movement toward a closer vowel position, typically [ɪ] or [ʊ]. Examples such as day [deɪ] and now [naʊ] illustrate how the articulatory gesture moves upward or backward within the vowel space. These diphthongs are highly frequent and play an essential role in lexical contrast. In contrast, centring diphthongs involve movement toward the central vowel [ɪ] as seen in near [nɪ] and square [skwɪ]. Although some centring diphthongs show signs of reduction or monophthongization in modern English, they remain relevant in standard pronunciation models.

Functionally, diphthongs contribute significantly to meaning differentiation in English. Minimal pairs such as cot [kɒt] and coat [kəʊt] clearly illustrate the role of diphthongs in establishing phonemic contrasts. A change from a monophthong to a diphthong is sufficient to signal a difference in lexical meaning, underscoring the functional importance of these vowel units. Furthermore, diphthongs enhance the expressive potential of speech by adding dynamic quality to vowel articulation.

From a phonological standpoint, diphthongs participate in systematic oppositions within the vowel inventory of English. They interact with stress placement and syllable structure in predictable ways, behaving as single phonemes rather than sequences. The contrast between late [leɪt] and let [let] demonstrates that the presence of a diphthong constitutes a phonemic distinction independent of vowel length alone. Such evidence reinforces the view that diphthongs are integral elements of the English phonological system.

In applied linguistics, the correct production of diphthongs presents notable challenges for learners of English as a foreign language. Speakers whose native languages lack comparable vowel glides often replace diphthongs with simple vowels, leading to pronunciation deviations. For example, home [ho:m] may be pronounced instead of home [hm], which can affect intelligibility. Addressing these difficulties requires pedagogical

approaches that emphasize articulatory movement rather than static vowel targets.

In conclusion, diphthongs occupy a central position in the English phonetic system due to their structural complexity and functional significance. Their dynamic articulatory nature distinguishes them from monophthongs and enables them to serve as effective phonemic units in meaning differentiation. The analysis presented in this article highlights the importance of understanding diphthongs as unified vocalic elements with both theoretical and practical relevance. The findings contribute to phonetic theory and provide valuable insights for pronunciation teaching, ultimately supporting more accurate and effective spoken communication in English.

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