The Phonetics of English
Pronunciation - Week 8

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Topics

- The vowel /æ/ (as in bat, bag, bap etc.
- "Diphthongal" English
- Schwa in diphthongs
- Compare the quality of English and German schwa
- Consider how destressing affects vowel quality in English (vowel weakening)
- Look at the consequences of vowel weakening for function words (in English, and compare them with German)
- See how weakening affects consonants as well as vowels

Read: Sections IV.3, pp. 213-222
The vowel /æ/

- We know it’s a problem vowel because a strange **IPA-symbol** is used!
- But it’s the **sound** that’s the problem – not the symbol!
- Play with your articulation: [ɛɛ–ææ–ɑɑ–ɑɑ–ʌʌ]!

*Read: Section III.2, pp. 25-29*

- Listen carefully to the examples and imitate!
  e.g.: 💃

This is the most notorious German vowel error. Many fluent speakers of English fail to master the vowel and pronounce it the same as the vowel in *bed, set, leg*, so that these words and *bad, sat, lag* are homophones!

As you will see on the next slide, there are **English regional variants** (notably New Zealand and South Africa) which do use that close quality, but the *bed, set, leg* vowel then shifts to a different quality.
The vowel /æ/ 2

“The cat got in through the catflap”

\[
/æ/ = [\text{?}]
\]

Conservative RP [æ]
(similar to N.E. US)
NZ & SA [ɛ]
SBE & US (mid-west) [æ]
Northern BE [a]
Glasgow & Belfast [ɛ]

This is what Gemans often pronounce

The value we are aiming at as Standard is one of many different qualities you will hear if you pay attention to the way English speakers pronounce the *cat, sat, mat* words.

The black ellipse shows that there is quite a range of acceptable "standard" qualities for the "cat" vowel. But they are all a long way from the usual quality that German learners use (which is similar to the New Zealand and South African quality)
Diphthongs

- English is much more “diphthongal” than German:
  - /i/ and /u/ are slightly diphthongal
  - there is English /æt/ and /ɒu/ instead of German /ɛt/ and /oː/
- The quality of /ɒu/ was discussed last week.
- The quality of /et/ is best described as the /e/ vowel of “bed, bet, set” etc. + a short, weak /u/.

But of course there is variation in the onset:

“The rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain.”
American [ɛt] (and conservative RP!);
Southern Standard British: [etimes]; Midlands British [ɛt];
Estuary English [æt]; Australian/Kiwi [œt];

There can be diphthongs – which are long vowels with two distinct qualities – and diphthongized vowels, i.e., vowels that clearly change their quality during the course of the vowel, but which don’t have two distinct qualities.
Apart from /ʊt, əʊ, ɔu/, which exist in both German and English (though with slightly different qualities, as we have already described), there are other diphthongal vowels in English.
These can vary in the extent to which the quality changes during the vowel (to what degree they are diphthongal).
/et/ and /ɒu/ are diphthongs in Standard British English and US English, but they can vary from rather wide diphthongs to monophthongs in different regional variants.
Both German and English have *R-diphthongs* or "centering" diphthongs apart from the three diphthongs that we have described earlier /æɪ, əʊ, ɔɪ/.  

**Centering diphthongs** are the product of a vowel and a following /r/ in British English (in American they tend to become an R-coloured vowel.  
Such diphthongs also exist in German, but as the diagram shows, the German vowels are much more extreme in their starting point, and they move towards the A-schwa position ([ə]).

The R effect on preceding vowels in American *can* (in some dialects) lead to the neutralization of several distinctions which are phonemic in British English.

In the extreme forms, the words *Mary, marry* and *merry* are pronounced identically (they are *homophones*) as /ˈmeri/.
Diphthongs 3: Variation again!

- Take the "air, bare, care, dare, fair" diphthong as an example:
  
  British English: But "four" can be [fɔː] or [fœə]
  "fair" can be and "far" can be [fəː] or [fæə]
  [fœə] or [fæə]

  American English has the [i]-coloured schwa in a clear diphthong: [ɛə] / [ɛi]

  But!
  The [ɪ]-colouring in US-English has obscured the /ɛr/ vs. /ɛr/ vs. /ɛr/ 
  oppositions in some areas.
  So: merry = Mary = marry

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In the extreme forms, the words Mary, marry and merry are pronounced identically (they are homophones) as /ˈmeri/.

In British English there is (as always!) a change in progress.
Many young speakers now say [fœː; dɛː, bɛː] for fair, dare, bare, which used to be much less common.
This appears to be a parallel development to changes in other vowels that has progressed much further. The /ɑː/ vowel in R words like core, sore, boar, are predominantly monophthongal (i.e., [ɑː]). But in some areas (and this used to be more widespread) it is pronounced [ɔə].
Similarly, the /ɑː/ vowel in words like bar, car, star is a monophthongal [ɑː], but it is sometimes pronounced with a schwa-like offglide as [əə].
Practice expressions

• You can’t drink beer here! [ˌbiə hɪər]_{\text{Br}} [ˌ ˈbiər hɪər]_{\text{US}}
• It’s a sure cure! [ˌʃʊər kjuər]_{\text{Br}} [ˌ ʃoʊr kjuər]_{\text{US}}
• I’ve a spare pair. [ˌspɛər peər]_{\text{Br}} [ˌ spre pər]_{\text{US}}

Common (British) variants:

/ʊə/ → [ɔː] .. so “sure” ~ “shore”; “poor” ~ “paw”
/ɛə/ → [ɛː] is an even more modern development
... so care, pair, lair ~ [kʰɛː pʰɛː ˈleː]_{\text{Br}}

Read: Section V.3.6., pp.168-175

Another diphthong/monophthong choice in British English is with the poor, sure, tour vowel
The /ʊə/ diphthong in British English has become identical with /ɔː/ for many speakers (i.e., the diphthong is lost).
This is much more common than the less widespread (but quickly spreading) monophthongisation is the change from /ɛə/ to [ɛː] we mentioned in the last slide..
US English has retained the /ʊə/ diphthong as an R-coloured [ɔːr] and the /ɛə/ diphthong as an R-coloured [ɛːɾ].
The unstressed vowel [ə]

- We have already covered the difference between English „schwa“ ([ə]), and seen part of the difference with the centering (< r >) diphthongs:

Listen for the differences:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>G</th>
<th>G</th>
<th>E</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>bitte</td>
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<td>Locke</td>
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<td>Klippe</td>
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<tr>
<td>Linde</td>
<td>linder</td>
<td>Linda</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

N.B. in American, [ə] does not occur in < er > words! It is [œə].

The different qualities of the unstressed vowels is not often considered.
For Germans the difference between Bitte and bitter is so obvious they don’t stop to think about it (but it’s very problematical for English learners)
But Germans, in their turn, don’t think about the English /ə/ being different from German /œ/.  
Listen to and practise the exercises on the CD belonging to the book!
One big difference between English and German is the change in quality that affects unstressed vowels. In English they become schwa!

We see this in related words where the stress shifts:

**Philosopher** vs. **philosophical**

/ˈfɪləˈsɒfəl/ vs. /ˈfɪləˈsɒfɪkal/

**constable** vs. **constabulary**

/ˈkɒnstəbəl/ vs. /ˈkɒnstəbələri/

This weakening of unstressed vowels also occurs in running speech, where grammatical words (function words) are mostly unstressed.

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A huge problem for German learners of English is the weakening of unstressed vowels to something close to /ə/. A complicating factor is the spelling, because all the vowel letters can be pronounced /ə/ when unstressed, e.g.:

- <a> as in *constable*
- <e> as in *before*
- <i> as in *mistake*
- <o> as in *moi*est
- <u> as in *curator*

The reason why the spelling has not been simplified (in order to have schwa always spelt with <e>) is presumably because related words with different stress patterns retain the non-schwa pronunciation of the vowel, as the examples in the slide show.

Function words are a special case, because they are MOSTLY pronounced without stress (so that their vowels tend to become schwa), but they CAN be stressed (for emphasis or contrast), in which case their vowels are pronounced with the full quality.

E.g., „*I can* help“ /aɪ kɛn help/ or „*I can* help“ /aɪ ˈkæn help/
Function words

• Grammatical words are not semantically important. They merely bind the sentence together. Therefore they tend to be unstressed!

• Unstressed = less time and effort in articulation  
  → Reduction in the phonetic distinctiveness

• We don’t say:

  Can I borrow the car for the rest of the day?  
  [kɛn aɪ bɔɹəʊ dɪ: ˈkɑː fɔː dɪ: ˈrest əv dɪ: dɛɪ]

  We say:

  Can I borrow the car for the rest of the day?  
  [kən ˈbɔːr ər ˈkɑː fɔː ˈrest əv ˈdiː]

Here we show the reasons for the weakening to schwa of the vowels in unstressed syllables.

The transcription symbols we use do not reflect the only possible pronunciation. We use conventionalised „weak forms“ to remind learners of the tendency to reduce.

The degree of reduction depends on the speaking style, and both less reduced and more reduced forms are possible.

One example of a variable form that is not transcribed in a reduced form in this example is the personal pronoun „I“. It is normally transcribed in its full form /aɪ/, although in reality it is often reduced to something like [əʊ] or even to a simple [ə] sound (similar to the German A-schwa at the end of „Mutter“)
Function words 2

- The binding word par excellence is, of course **AND**
  
  *Time and again!* [ˈtʌm ənd ˈæɡen]  
  *Coffee and cakes.* ['kɒfi ənd 'keiks]  
  *Ham and eggs.* ['hæm ənd 'eɡz]

- Other categories are:

  - **Prepositions**: to, for, from ... and **articles**: the, a, an
  - **Clause linkers**: because, that, as, but
  - **Comparative structures**: than, as ..., as, so ..., as
  - **Pronouns**: he, him, she, her, we, us, you, they, them
    his, her, her, our, your, their
  - **Auxiliary &**: is, are, was, were; has, have, had
  - **modal verbs**: will, would, shall, should, can, could

The expression „Ham and eggs“ is known to many Germans who have never learned English (it seems to be the epitome of English/American breakfasts).

It is also a good example of the reduced „and“ form. Here, **the conventionalised** [ən] **form is given, but it is often reduced to a single** [ŋ], particularly after a word ending with a consonant:

*Time and again* - [ˈtʌm ŋ ə′gen]. *It's good and hot* - [ɪts ˈgʊd ŋ ˈhɒt].
  
  **US** [ɪts ˈgʊd ŋ ˈhæt].

The small vertical diacritic under the [ŋ] signifies that it is still syllabic; **the nasal carries the syllable**.

The function words that are most frequently reduced are listed here. We go through them systematically in the following slides.
Prepositions

• **TO**
  - It fell to the floor  [it 'fɛl tə ðə 'flə: (flə)]
  - Come to tea.  ['kʌm tə 'tiː]
  - Time to go home.  ['taɪm tə ɡəʊ 'həʊm]

• **FOR**
  - Do it for my sake.  ['ðuː it fə(fə) 'mæri 'seɪk]
  - No time for tears!  ['nəʊ təɪm fə 'tɛz (fə 'tɛz)]
  - Right for the job.  ['raɪt fə ðə 'dʒɔb (fə ðə 'dʒɔb)]

• **FROM**
  - A present from heaven.  [ə 'prɛzənt fɪəm 'hɛvən]
  - From me to you.  [fɪəm 'miː tə 'juː]
  - It came from nowhere.  [ɪt 'kɛm fɪəm 'nəʊweə(ə)]

One of the problems with learning „weak forms“ is the need to focus on them. Focussing on them means paying attention to them, and the risk from that is to give them too much effort – **exactly the opposite of what you need to do!**

The tactic adopted here is to write them in red to make you notice them, but also to write them smaller, to remind you that they have to be reduced.
Clause linkers

- **BECAUSE**
  Because I say so!  
  I left because I felt ill.
- **THAT**
  I knew that I could do it.  
  Don’t say that I can’t.
- **AS**
  He went out as I came in.  
  He laughed, as I expected.
- **BUT**
  It’s naughty but nice.  
  Small but expensive.

Three of the examples on this slide call for a special comment:

„because“ is often reduced to one syllable [kɔz]. This logical if you consider that the reduced syllable remaining is actually the stressed syllable of the full form /br'kɔz/ (US [br'kɔz] or [br'kɔz]). If the stressed syllable is reduced, it is not surprising that the unstressed syllable disappears.

„that“ can disappear altogether too, as you have probably learned in English Grammar:

I knew that I could do it.  →  I knew I could do it.
Don’t say I can’t  →  Don’t say I can’t.
The thing that I want is …  →  The thing I want is …

**But NOT**if the “that” is the subject of the relative clause!

The thing that worries me is ..  →  *The thing worries me is ….

„but“ is transcribed /bʌt/, but in US English the phonetic quality is very close to schwa even when the word is stressed, so there is often only a reduction in the duration of the word, without much change in vowel quality. With the increasing influence of American English in Britain, this is also becoming quite common in young people’s speech in Britain too.
Comparatives

• **AS.... AS**
  - As soon as possible. [əz 'sʌn əz 'pɒsɪbəl (pəsɪbəl)]
  - It’s as good as ever. [ɪts əz 'gʊd əz 'evə (evə)]

• **NOT SO .... AS**
  - Not so good as I’d like. ['nɒt (nat) səʊ 'gʊd əs aɪ'd laɪk]
  - It’s not so bad as it seems. [ɪts 'nɒt (nat) səʊ 'bæd əz it 'sɪmz]

• **NOT SO ....**
  - (How are you? How was it?)
  - Not so bad, thanks ['nɒt (nat) səʊ 'bæd 'θæŋks]

The incorrect stressing of the comparative form „as ..... as“ is one of the clearest indications that grammatical forms are taught intensively in schools while pronunciation is neglected! Teachers (and consequently pupils) are so worried about getting the morpho-syntax of the comparatives correct that they automatically stress the „as“ particles. Of course the mistake is not perceivable in writing, but every time a learner writes the correct form, she/he speaks the wrongly stressed form to herself/himself. This reinforces the incorrect pronunciation, and it has become one of the most stubborn features of Denglish.

The negative comparative „not so ..... as“ is increasingly being replaced by „not as ..... as“. This is a morpho-syntactic change, of course, which does not affect the need to destress the particles.
Pronouns

• **HE, HIM, HIS, HER** often lose the /h/

  Is he happy? [iz i 'hæpi]
  I found him [at 'faund im]
  It’s his first attempt. [itz iz 'fɜːst (fɜːst) ə'tempt]
  Did he tell her. [did i 'tɛl ə (ə)]

• **SHE** and **WE** are just shortened (/i:/ becomes [i])

  Did she know? [did ji 'nəu]
  We never knew! [wi 'nevə (nevə) ən(j)uː]

• **YOU** and **YOUR** can be the same in Br. Engl: [jə]; **not** in US

  You did your best! [jə 'did jə (jə) 'best]

The weak forms of the personal pronouns are something that native speakers can argue about quite heatedly. Language “purists“ are always complaining that the language is deteriorating, particularly in the mouths of the younger generation (and/or the „uneducated classes“)!

One pet dislike of language purists is dropping the “H“ (many regional dialects drop their “Hs“ from words beginning with <h>), and since the unstressed personal pronouns often lose their initial /h/, this too is condemned as improper pronunciation.

However, **“H“-dropping is quite normal** in “he, him, his, her“, most generally after words ending in consonants (Give him some help! [ˈɡɪv im səm ˈhelp]), but in **non-formal** speech it is also quite normal following vowels (Can you see him? [kən jə 'siː im]).
Pronouns 2

• **THEM** and **US** become [ðəm] and [əs]

  I saw **them** come. [ai 'sæ: ðəm 'kʌm]
  She told **us** the truth. [ʃi 'tɔːld əs ðə 'truθ]

• **THEY, THEIR** and **OUR** can be shortened & "de-diphthongised"

  Did **they** know? ['dɪd ðe 'nəʊ]
  What’s **their** name? ['wɔts ðe 'neɪm]
  It’s **our** first holiday! [ɪts a 'fɜːst 'hɒlədeɪ]
    (ar 'fɜːst)

The reduction of the personal pronoun „I“ was mentioned earlier. „They, their“ and „our“ behave similarly. **They are often excluded from the normal canon of weak forms**, and in slow speech their diphthongal structure does tend to resist reduction to a certain extent (and since non-native speakers speak more slowly than native speakers, extreme reduction would not fit their speaking style).

However, you **should be aware** that by reducing the duration of these words in unstressed position, you automatically reduce the quality. This is symbolized by showing them as monphongized diphthongs; the second element, the off-glide, can disappear completely:

/æə/ → [ɛ]
/ɛə/ → [ɛ]
/əʊ/ → [a]

**When practising though, just concentrate on shortening the word.** The reduction in quality will follow automatically.
Auxiliary and modal verbs

• The verb TO BE is often reduced even in orthography…
  … and should ALWAYS be reduced in speech …
  … unless stressed:

  What is the time? [ˈwɒts ə ˈtʌm]
  Those are mine! [ˈðəʊz ə (ɔ) ˈmain]
  That was stupid! [ˈðæt ˌwɒz ˈstjuːpid (ˈstjuːpid)]
  They were very unhappy! [ði ˌwa (wa) ˈveri ʌnˈhæpi]

• If HAVE isn’t used as a full verb or stressed as an auxiliary, it is also reduced:

  What has happened? [ˈwɒts ˈhæpnd]
  What have you done? [ˈwɒt ɔv jə ˈdʌn]
  Their dream had come true. [ði ˈdɛɪm əd kəm ˈtruː]

The reduction of the auxiliary verbs „be“ and „have“ is most easily accepted by learners because the orthographic form often reflects the reduction (people are more conscious of what they see than what they hear?).

Note that „is“ and „has“ take on the same form when reduced (which, interestingly, leads to mistakes in the written forms of native speakers!!).

Note also that „have“ loses the initial /h/ (as we saw with „he, her, his, him“), and consequently becomes homophous (= is pronounced the same) as the weak form of „of“. (This also leads to interesting mistakes in the written English of some native speakers. They sometimes write sentences like „He could have injured himself“ as „He could of injured himself“! … because – of course – the pronunciation is the same.)
Auxiliary and modal verbs 2

• The modal verbs WILL, WOULD, CAN, COULD, SHALL SHOULD are also reduced …
  … unless they’re stressed:

  What will you do?        ['wɔt jə 'du:]
  What would you do?      ['wɔt əd jə 'du:]
  or:                      ['wɔt əd jə 'du:]
  How can you do that?    ['hau kən jə 'dæt]
  How could we help?      ['hau kəd wi 'hɛp]
  We shall do what we can. [wi jəf 'du wɔt wi 'kæn]

Of the modal verbs, „will“ and „would“ tend to be reduced most.

As in the above example, „will“ is generally reduced to [ɪ], which is syllabic after a consonant.

In casual speech „would“ can be reduced to [əd] and then becomes almost homophonous with one of the weak forms of „had“. It is then only the overall structure of the verbal complex that distinguishes the two functions (conditional vs. past perfect:

„How would he do it?“     ['hau əd i 'du: it]
„How had he done it?“     ['hau əd i 'dæn it]
Auxiliary and modal verbs 3

- **Combinations** of auxiliary and modal verbs are reduced too.
  (... unless they’re stressed):

  She **could have** done anything she wanted!
  \[\text{[ji kəd òv dən 'enrifən jī 'wəntid]}\]
  They **have been** all over the world.
  \[\text{[de(t)v bın 'ətl ənuən 'wə:təd (wə'təd)]}\]
  He **will have left** by now.
  \[\text{[hil òv 'left biə 'nau]}\]

You will now expect the similar treatment of combined auxiliary + modal structures.

The problem with the combinations is their length, and it is probably clear to you now that **you will only be able to pronounce them weakly enough if their production is totally automatic**.

You need to learn them as fixed phrases. If you are searching for the correct form of the verbal construction, of course, you will be slow in articulating, and then the weakened form would sound completely wrong.
Now for an exercise!

• Transcribe the following text – marking the syllables you would stress when reading, and also marking the contextual variants we have learned about:

When the girls reached home, there was nobody there.

All the windows were dark, and there was not a single sign of life.

*If we don’t finish it, you finish it for homework.*
Here is the transcription

When the girls reached home, there was nobody there.

All the windows were dark, and there was not a single sign of life.
Exercises for weeks 8 (hand in by Thurs. 18.00)

1. Transcribe the following words, paying particular attention to the quality of the unstressed vowels. (Look them up in a dictionary if you are not certain):

"consternation"  "malicious"
"applicable"     "charismatic"
"solicitous"     "fantasize"
"repetition"     "recognition"
"philanthropic"  "sequential"
And for more practice (cont.)

• Transcribe the following text – marking the syllables you would stress when reading and marking the weak forms and contextual variants we have learned about:

It was strangely unnerving in the cold and dark of the night.

They felt quite small and vulnerable as they became aware

of all the strange sounds of the farmyard.