Version SS 2008

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: [ɛ–e̝–æ–a̝–a–a̠–ɑ]!

  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/ = [?]

Conservative RP [eə]

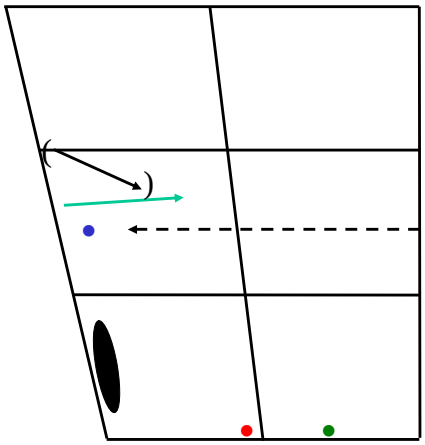
(similar to N.E. US)

NZ & SA [ɐ̟]

SBE & US (mid-west) [æ]

Northern BE [a̠]

Glasgow & Belfast [ɑ̟ː]



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:
  - /iː/ and /uː/ are slightly diphthongal
  - there is English /eɪ/ and /əʊ/ instead of German /eː/ and /oː/
- The quality of /əʊ/ was discussed last week.
- The quality of /eɪ/ is best described as the /e/ vowel of "bed, bet, set" etc. + a short, weak /ɪ/.

But of course there is ***variation*** in the onset:

"The ***rain*** in ***Spain*** falls ***mainly*** on the ***plain***."
American **[eɪ]** (and conservative RP!);

Southern Standard British: **[e̝ɪ]**; Midlands British **[ɛɪ]**;
Estuary English **[æɪ];** Australian/Kiwi [ɑ̟ɪ]:

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 /aɪ, aʊ, ɔɪ/, 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).

/eɪ/ and /əʊ/ are diphthongs in Standard British English and US English, but they can vary from rather ***wide diphthongs*** to ***monophthongs*** in different regional variants.

Diphthongs 2

- Both German and British English have < r > diphthongs:

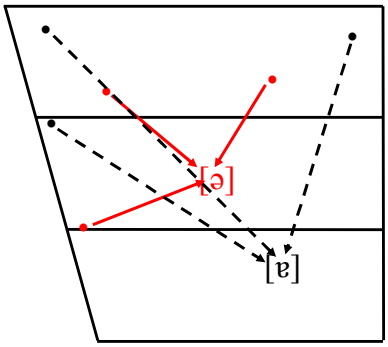
E.g.: ***vier – fear***
Schur – sure
Meer – mare

American English has [ɹ]-coloured vowels + [ɹ]:
fear, sure, mare

- So what's the phonetic difference?

a) The onset quality:
[i] vs. [ɪ], [u] vs. [ʊ]
[e] vs. [ɛ]

b) The offset quality:
[ɐ] vs [ə]



Both German and English have ***R-diphthongs*** or ***„centering" diphthongs*** apart from the three diphthongs that we have described earlier /aɪ, aʊ, 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 ([ɐ]).

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!

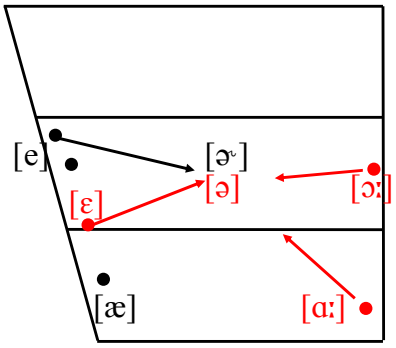
- Take the "*air, bare, care, dare, fair*" diphthong as an example:

British English:
"*fair*" can be
[fɛə] or [fɛː]

But "*four*" can be [fɔː] or [fɔə]
and "*far*" can be [fɑː] or [fɑə]

American English has the [ɹ]-coloured schwa in a clear diphthong: [eə˞] / [eɹ]

But!
The [ɹ]-colouring in US-English has obscured the /er/ vs. /eə˞r/ vs. /er/ oppositions in some areas.
So: *merry* = *Mary* = *marry*



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In British English there is (as always!) a change in progress.
Many young speakers now say [fɛː, 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 / ɔː / vowel in R words like core, sore, boar, are predominantly monophthongal (i.e., [ɔː]). 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 [ɑə].

Practice expressions

- You can‘t drink ***beer here***! [.. bɪə hɪə]$_{Br}$ [. . bɪər hɪər]$_{US}$
- It’s a ***sure cure***! [.. ʃʊə kjʊə]$_{Br}$ [. . ʃʊər kjʊər]$_{US}$
- I’ve a ***spare pair***. [.. spɛə pɛə]$_{Br}$ [. . spɛr pɛr]$_{US}$

Common (British) variants:

/ʊə/ → [ɔː] .. so “sure” ~ “shore”; “poor” ~ “paw”

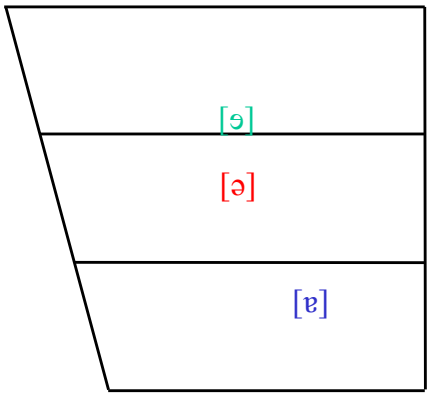
/ɛə/ → [ɛː] is an even more modern development
... so care, pair, lair ~ [k^{h}ɛː p^{h}ɛː lɛː]$_{Br}$

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/ diphtong as an R-coloured [ʊr] and the /ɛə/ diphthong as an R-coloured [ɐ̯r].

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:

G	***G***	***E***
bitte	– bitter	– bitter
Locke	– locker	– locker
Klippe	– Klipper	– clipper
Linde	– linder	– Linda

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

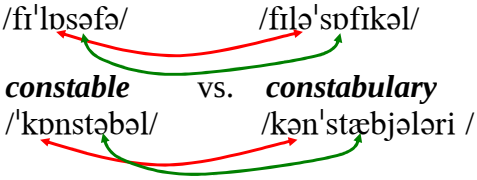
The different qualities of the unstressed vowels is not often considered.
For Germans the difference between *Bitte* and *bitter* is so obvious they don‘t stop to think about it (but it‘s very problematical for English learners)
But Germans, in their turn, don‘t think about the English /ə/ being different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

Where does [ə] occur?

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***
/fɪˈlɒsəfə/ /fɪləˈsɒfɪkəl/

constable vs. ***constabulary***
/ˈkɒnstəbəl/ /kənˈstæbjələri /



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

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 *const<u>a</u>ble*
<e> as in *b<u>e</u>fore*
<i> as in *m<u>i</u>stake*
<o> as in *m<u>o</u>lest*
<u> as in c*<u>u</u>rator*

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“ /ˈaɪ kən 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?

  [kæn aɪ bɒɹəʊ ðiː kɑː fɔː ðiː ɹest ɒv ðiː deɪ]

  We say:

  Can I ***borrow*** the ***car*** for the ***rest*** of the ***day?***

  [kən aɪ ˈbɒɹə ðə ˈkɑː fə ðə ˈɹest əv ðə ˈdeɪ]

  US bɑɹə US kɑɹ fəˑ

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 mored 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 [ɐə] or even to a simple [ɐ] 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!	[ˈtaɪm ən əˈgen]
Coffee *and* cakes.	[ˈkɒfiː ən ˈkeɪks]
Ham *and* eggs.	[ˈhæm ən ˈegz]

- 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, our, your, their*
Auxiliary & modal verbs: *is, are, was, were*; *has, have, had*; *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* [n̩],** particularly after a word ending with a consonant:

Time and again - [ˈtaɪm n̩ əˈgen], *It's good and hot* - [ɪts ˈgʊd n̩ ˈhɒt].
US [ɪts ˈgʊd n̩ ˈhɑt].

The small vertical diacritic under the [n] 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	[ɪt ˈfeɬ tə ðə ˈflɔː (fɬoɹ)]
Come to tea.	[ˈkʌm tə ˈtiː]
Time to go home.	[ˈtaɪm tə gəʊ ˈhəʊm]

- ***FOR***

Do it for my sake.	[ˈduː ɪt fə(fəˇ) ˈmaɪ ˌseɪk]
No time for tears!	[ˈnəʊ ˌtaɪm fə ˈtɪəz (fəˇ ˈtɪəˇz])
Right for the job.	[ˈɹaɪt fə ðə ˈdʒɒb (fəˇ ðə ˈdʒɑb)]

- ***FROM***

A present from heaven.	[ə ˈpɹezənt fɹəm ˈhevən]
From me to you.	[fɹəm ˈmiː tə ˈjuː]
It came from nowhere.	[ɪt ˈkeɪm fɹəm ˈnəʊwɛə(ɛəˇ)]

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!	[(bɪ)kəz aɪ ˈseɪ səʊ]
I left because I felt ill.	[aɪ ˈleft (bɪ)kəz aɪ feɬt ˈɪɬ]

- ***THAT***

I knew that I could do it.	[aɪ ˈnjuː (nuː) ðət aɪ kəd ˈduː ɪt]
Don't say that I can't.	[ˈdəʊnt seɪ ðət aɪ ˈkɑːnt (kænt)]

- ***AS***

He went out as I came in.	[ˈhiː wen(t) ˈaʊt əz ˈaɪ keɪm ˈɪn]
He laughed, as I expected.	[hi ˈlɑːft (læft) əz aɪ ɪksˈpektɪd]

- ***BUT***

It's naughty but nice.	[ɪts ˈnɔːti (ˈnɔːɾi) bət ˈnaɪs]
Small but expensive.	[ˈsmɔːɬ bət ɪksˈpensɪv]

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

„**because**" is often reduced to one syllable [kəz]. This logical if you consider that the reduced syllable remaining is actually the ***stressed*** syllable of the full form /bɪˈkɒz/ (US [bɪˈkɑz] or [bɪˈkɔːz]). 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 NOTif 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 ˈsuːn əz ˈpɒsɪbəɬ (pɑsɪbəɬ)]
It's as good as ever. [ɪts əz ˈgʊd əz ˈevə (evəˠ)]

- ***NOT SO …. AS***

Not so good as I'd like. [ˈnɒt (nɑt) sə ˈgʊd əz aɪd ˈlaɪk]
It's not so bad as it seems. [ɪts ˈnɒt (nɑt) sə ˈbæd əz ɪt ˈsiːmz)]

- ***NOT SO ….***

(How are you? How was it?)
Not so bad, thanks [ˈnɒt (nɑt) sə ˈbæd ˈθæŋks]

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 morphp-syntactic change, of course, ***which does <u>not</u> affect the need to destress the particles***.

Pronouns

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

Is he happy?	[ɪz i ˈhæpi]
I found him	[aɪ ˈfaʊnd ɪm]
It's his first attempt.	[ɪts ɪz ˈfɜːst (fɜˠst) əˈtempt]
Did he tell her.	[dɪd i ˈtel ə (əˠ)]

- ***SHE*** and ***WE*** are just shortened (/iː/ becomes [i])

Did she know?	[dɪd ʃi ˈnəʊ]
We never knew!	[wi ˈnevə (nevəˠ) ˈn(j)uː]

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

You did your best!	[jə ˈdɪd jə (jəˠ) ˈbest]

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*! [ˈgɪv ɪm səm ˈhelp]), but in ***non-formal*** speech it is also quite normal following vowels (*Can you see him*? [kən jə ˈsiː ɪm]).

Pronouns 2

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

I saw them come.	[aɪ ˈsɔː ðəm ˈkʌm]
She told us the truth.	[ʃi ˈtəʊɬd əs ðə ˈtɹuːθ]

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

Did they know?	[ˈdɪd ðe ˈnəʊ]
What's their name?	[ˈwɒts ðɛ ˈneɪm]
It's our first holiday!	[ɪts a ˈfɜːst ˈhɒlɪdeɪ] (ar ˈfɜˑst)

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 monphthongized diphthongs; the second element, the off-glide, can disappear completely:

/eɪ/ → [e]
/ɛə/ → [ɛ]
/aʊ/ → [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 ðə ˈtaɪm]
Those are mine!	[ˈðəʊz ə (ərˠ) ˈmaɪn]
That was stupid!	[ˈðæt wəz ˈstjuːpɪd (ˈstuːpɪd)]
They were very unhappy!	[ðeɪ wə (wərˠ) ˈveri ʌnˈhæpi]

- If ***HAVE*** isn‘t used as a ***full verb*** or ***stressed*** as an auxiliary, it is also reduced:

What has happened?	[ˈwɒts ˈhæpn̩d]
What have you done?	[ˈwɒt əv jə ˈdʌn]
Their dream had come true.	[ðɛ(r) ˈdɹiːm əd kʌm ˈtɹuː]

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 homophonous (= 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?		[ˈwɒtɬ jə ˈduː]
What would you do?		[ˈwɒt wəd jə ˈduː]
	or:	[ˈwɒt əd jə ˈduː]
How can you do that?		[ˈhaʊ kən jə ˈduː ˈðæt]
How could we help?		[ˈhaʊ kəd wi ˈheɬp]
We shall do what we can.		[wi ʃəɬ ˈdu wɒt wi ˈkæn]

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

As in the above example, „*will*" is generally reduced to [ɬ], 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*?"	[ˈhaʊ əd i ˈduː ɪt]
„*How had he done it*?"	[ˈhaʊ əd i ˈdʌn ɪt]

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!
[ʃi kəd əv dʌn ˈenɪθɪŋ ʃi ˈwɒntɪd]

They have been all over the world.
[ðe(ɪ)v bɪn ˈɔːɬ əʊvə ˈwɜːɬd (wɜˠɬd)]

He will have left by now.
[hil əv ˈleft baɪ ˈnaʊ]

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, an 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.

[weɲ̃ ðə ˈgɜːɬz ˈriːtʃt ˈhəʊm ðə wəz ˈnəʊbədi ˈðɛə]
ˈgɜrɬz oʊ ðər wəz oʊ ˈðɛr]

All the windows were dark, and there was not a single

[ˈɔːɬ̃ ðə ˈwɪndəʊz wə ˈdɑːk əɲ̃ ðə ˈwɒzɳt ə ˈsɪŋgɬ̩
oʊ wər ˈdɑɹk əɲ̃ ðər wəz ˈnɑt

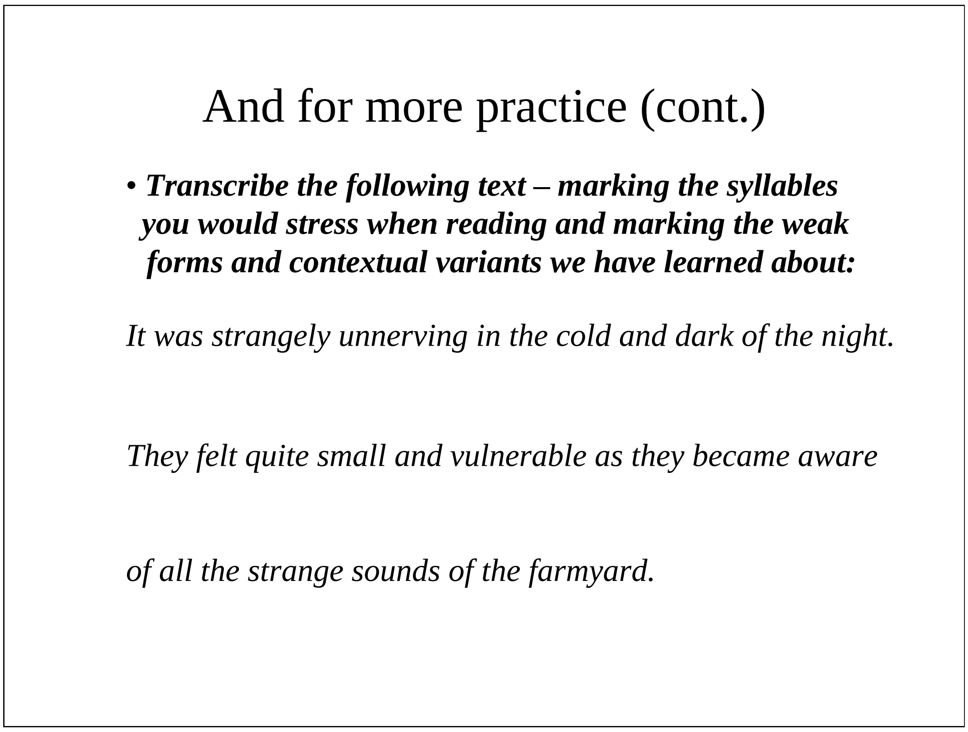
sign of life.

ˈsaɪn əv ˈlaɪf

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.