

Lecture 8 The vowel system: weak vowels

1. The symbols **i**, **u**

1.1 –denote the neutralization of /i:/ - ɪ/, /u:/ - ʊ/, in weak syllables:

happy 'hæpi, *tell me* 'telmi, *value* 'vælju, *thank you* 'θæŋkjʊ; prevocalic: *radiation* ˌreɪdi'eɪʃn, *glorious* 'glɔːriəs, *he isn't* hi'ɪznt; *situation* ˌsɪtʃu'eɪʃn, *influence* 'ɪnfluəns, *to ask* tu'ɑːsk

1.2 Neutralization is arguably demonstrated by same-speaker fluctuation, by use of phonetically intermediate sounds, and by use of indeterminate sounds

1.3 Inflected forms still have **i**, **u** *babies*, *carried*, *prettier*, *valuer*

1.4 **i**: vs **i** *pedigree/mimicry*; **u**: vs. **u** *cuckoo/thank you*. Cf **ɜ**: vs. **ə** *insert (n)/concert*

2. **Weakening**. We recognize a system of weak vowels as the possible outputs of this process.

2.1 Function words: *can* kæn – kən, *of* ɒv – əv, *them* ðem – ðəm, *are* ɑː – ə, *me* miː – mi

2.2 Morphologically related words: *anatomic* ˌænə'tɒmɪk – *anatomy* ə'nætəmi; *democratic* ˌdemə'krætɪk – *democracy* dɪ'mɒkrəsi; *variety* və'raɪəti – *vary* 'veəri, *variant* 'veəriənt; *immune* ɪ'mjuːn – *immunize* 'ɪmjunaɪz; *object* n. 'ɒbdʒekt, -dʒɪkt – *object* v. əb'dʒekt

2.3 Variant pronunciations: *Monday* -deɪ, -di, *November* nəʊ-, nə-, *angel* 'eɪndʒəl, -əl, -ɪ

3. **Weak vowels**. The weak-vowel system operates in certain unstressed syllables. Here there are fewer vowels distinguished than in the strong system. There are three obvious members of the weak system: **i**, **u**, **ə**. But RP differs from various other accents in also having weak **ɪ** and **ʊ** distinct from **ə** (though with frequent personal/stylistic fluctuation):

ɪ *finishing* 'fɪnɪʃɪŋ, *basic* 'beɪsɪk, *valid* 'vælɪd, *distress* dɪ'stres

ʊ *stimulus* 'stɪmjʊləs, *executive* ɪg'zɛkjʊtɪv, *virulent* 'vɪrʊlənt

3.2 Thus **ɪ** and **ʊ** belong to both strong and weak systems. (Hence no overt weak form of *it*.)

3.3 A stressed syllable must contain a strong vowel: but the converse does not hold. Thus *bedtime*, *acorn* 'eɪkɔːn, *colleague* 'kɒliːg, *sulphate*, *gymnast* 'dʒɪmnæst, *torment* n. -ment.

4. Syllabic consonants.

[ŋ] (*sudden* 'sʌdŋ)

[ɪ] (*middle* 'mɪdɪ)

[m] (*organism* 'ɔːgənɪzɪm)

[r] (*preference* 'prefrəns)

–can be regarded as phonetic realizations of immediately underlying phonological sequences /ən, əl, əm, ər/ respectively. (For another view: Ladefoged, *Course*, 4th ed., p. 58) Why?

- Alternative realizations ([ən] etc.) are usually possible. (Hence the dictionary notation ^ən)
- The sequences [ən] etc. sometimes have [ŋ] etc. as an alternative (*detonate* 'detneɪt)
- This accounts for the fact that syllabic consonants occur in weak syllables only.

4.1. SYLLABIC CONSONANT FORMATION

ə [+son +cons] → [+syll] / ...

(conditions partly phonetic, partly phonostylistic)

1 2 2

4.2 PROGRESSIVE ASSIMILATION

[ŋ] → [m] / {p, b}_ *open, ribbon*

Condition: not before a vowel (phonostylistic)

[ŋ] / {k, g}_ *bacon, organ*

Hence possible assimilation in *open (them)*, *opened*, but not in *opening*, *open it*.