The vowel system: weak vowels

1. The symbols i, u

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

- happy 'hæpi, tell me 'telmi, value 'vælju, thank you 'θæŋkjju; prevocalic: radiation ,reidi'etʃn, glorious 'glɔrɪəs, he isn't 'hi'iznt; situation ,sɪtʃu'etʃn, influence 'ɪnfluəns, to ask tu'æsk

1.2 Neutralsation 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 ə: 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 əv – əv, them ðem – ðəm, are ə – ə, me mi – mi

2.2 Morphologically related words: anatomic ænətɒmɪk – anatomy æ'nætɒmi; democratic ,demə'krætɪk – democracy dɪ'mɔkraʃi; variety və'raɪəti – vary və'ri, variant və'riənt; immune ɪm'juːən – immunize ɪm'jʊnaiz; object n. əbdʒekt, -dʒekt – object v. əb'dʒekt

2.3 Variant pronunciations: Monday ,mə'deni, -di, November nəʊvə, nə-, angel ə'endʒel, -əl, -l

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 i and u distinct from a (though with frequent personal/stylistic fluctuation):

- i finishing 'fɪnɪʃŋ, basic 'berɪsɪk, valid 'vælɪd, distress dɪ'stres
- u stimulus 'stɪmjuːləs, executive ɪgz'ekjʊətɪv, virulent 'vɜːrələnt

3.2 Thus i and u 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 ə'kɔrn, colleague 'kɒliːɡ, sulphate, gymnast 'dʒɪmnæst, torment n. -ment.

4. Syllabic consonants.

- [ʌ] (sudden 'sʌdʌn)  
- [i] (middle 'mɪdl)
- [m] (organism 'ɔɡənɪzəm)
- [r] (preference 'prɛfərəns)

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

- Alternative realizations ([ən] etc.) are usually possible. (Hence the dictionary notation ə'n)
- The sequences [ən] etc. sometimes have [n] etc. as an alternative (detonate 'detɔneɪt)
- 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 [n] → [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.