UNSTRESSED VOWELS IN ENGLISH: DISTRIBUTIONS AND CONSEQUENCES

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the vowel system of British English (BE)

category							_C	_#	_V
checked	i	ə	u	e	a	o	✓	✗	✗
long	i:	ə:	u:	e:	a:	o:	✓	✓	✗
free/‘diphthongs’	ij	əw	uw	ej	aj aw	oj	✓	✓	✓

- STRUT is `ə` (Fabricius 2007, Szigetvári 2018)
- NEAR `i:`, CURE `u:`, SQUARE `e:`, and FORCE `o:` have monophthongized (Jones 1918, Upton 1995, Lindsey 2012, Cruttenden 2014)
- FLEECE `ij` and GOOSE `uw` are ‘diphthongs’ (Sweet 1900)

stress and syllable weight

- stressability scale (most to least, Hayes 1995)
  VV$ > VC$ > V$
- ‘unstressability’ scale (most to least)
  V$ > VC$ > VV$

the unstressed vowels of BE

- **long** vowels cannot be unstressed (cf the ‘unstressability’ scale)
- the three ‘nonlow’ **checked** vowels may be unstressed (cf Kenstowicz 1997)
  (*comic* `kómik`, *common* `kóman`, *commutate* `kómjutejt`)
  nonlow: `i` `ə` `u` *unstressable*
  nonhigh: `e` `a` `o` *not unstressable*
- three **‘diphthongs’** may also be unstressed
  (*volley* `vólij`, *veto* `vijtəw`, *value* `váljuw`)
  nonlow: `ij` `əw` `uw` *unstressable*
  nonhigh: `ej` `aw` `aj` `oj` *not unstressable*
- the three unstressable ‘diphthongs’ are not random, they contain `i`, `ə`, and `u`

the unstressed ‘diphthongs’ of BE

- HAPPY-tensing (Wells 1982): `i` → `ij` / _{#,V}
  * `ij`C; *happy* `hápij` , † `hápi` ; *atrium* `éjtrijəm` , ? `éjtriəm`
- *omit* `əwmít` ~ `əmít` ; *veto* `víjtəw` , * `víjtə` ; *Genoa* `dʒénəwə` , * `dʒénəə`
  (also *fellow* `féləw` ~‘colloquial’ `félə`)
- *volume* `vóljuwm` ~ `vóljum` ; *value* `váljuw` , † `válju` ; *usual* `júwʒuwəl` , ? `júwʒuəl`
-

	_C	_#	_V
`ij`	✗	✓	✓
`əw`	~	✓	✓
`uw`	~	✓	✓

variability in unstressed position

- `i` → `ə`: *devil* `dévil` ~ `dévəl`, *event* `ivént` ~ `əvént`, *octave* `óktiv` ~ `óktəv`, *menace* `ménis` ~ `ménəs`, *chicken* `tʃíkin` ~ `tʃíkən`
- `u` → `ə`: *accurate* `ákjurət` ~ `ákjərət`, *chasuble* `tʃázjubəl` ~ `tʃázjəbəl`, *amulet* `ámjulit` ~ `ámjələt`

no variation

- *cómic* `-ik`, *pólish* `-iʃ`, *óstrich* `-itʃ`, víllage `-idʒ`, *háppy* `-ij`
  ie before a **velar/palatal** consonant (including `j` (!))
- *vólume* `-um`, *válue* `-uw`
  ie before a **labial** consonant (including `w` (!))

conclusion

`ij`, `əw`, and `uw` must be VC, not VV (cf Trager & Bloch 1941), because

- we find `i`, `ə`, `u` *and* `ij`, `əw`, `uw` in unstressed position:
  the simplest generalization is that we have `i`, `ə`, `u` in both cases
- unstressed `ij` does not occur before C (unprecedented for a vowel):
  `ij` V and `ij` # are light syllables, `ij` C is heavy (=less unstressable)
- unstressed `əw` and `uw` simplify to `ə` and `u` before C (not elsewhere):
  for the same reason as * `ij` C
- unstressed `i` is stable before velar and palatal C, including `j`
- unstressed `u` is stable before labial C, including `w`

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references

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