

Klaus Geyer
Pedagogical University of Vilnius (Lithuania)

Everything you always wanted to know about diphthongs, but were afraid to ask

At first glance, discerning, analysing, and describing diphthongs seems to be a simple task. In general, these objects of "diphthongology" are defined as combinations of two vowels which occur within one syllable. But this is where the trouble starts: Is it vowels or rather vocoids that are the basic sound elements of diphthongs? What does *two* mean in this context? Furthermore, what types of diphthongs can be identified? Finally, how do diphthongs and diphthong types vary cross-linguistically?

The complex diphthong inventories of circum-Baltic languages (including their substandard varieties) seem to be suitable to raise the question about how diphthongs are to be analysed and described adequately. I will examine features like: opening vs. closing; palatalising vs. velarising; rounding vs. de-rounding/spreading; nasalizing vs. de-nasalizing; centralising vs. de-centralising; narrow vs. wide; homogeneous vs. non-homogeneous; rising vs. falling; crescendo vs. decrescendo; primary, secondary, and tertiary.. It will be shown that these features are (i) in principle independent of each other and (ii) potentially phonologically relevant depending on the respective language. Moreover, questions like the analysis of diphthongs within the non-linear syllable structure, how diphthongs can be generated within a rule-based phonological grammar, and their controversial status (mono- or biphonemic) will be addressed. This presented list of potentially relevant features of diphthongs serves to be a preliminary approach to the subject. Around one third of the world's languages is assumed to have diphthongs as part of their phonological systems (even if by far not so large amounts as many of the circum-Baltic languages possess), but a sufficiently fine-grained means for analysis and description is still lacking. A closer look on the descriptions of the Finnish diphthong inventory or system as provided by grammatical sketches and reference grammars, as an example, shows surprisingly wide differences and even contradictions just in this respect and underlines the need for such a framework.

Finally, phonology is considered an indispensable constituent of every serious grammatical description of a language, as already Georg von der Gabelentz stated in the 19th century (but cf. also the more recent work on the topic by e. g. Ch. Lehmann and U. Mosel), even if phonology (including phonetic realisations) is to be treated outside the grammatical core, consisting of an analytic and a synthetic (i.e. a semasiological resp. an onomasiological) part. Besides that, diphthongs also appear to be a suitable touchstone for phonological arguments, hypotheses or theories.