

Intro to Reduced vowels

Web version

Schwa and other English reduced (= weak) vowels

- What we've talked about so far are the 'full vowels' of English
- English also has several reduced or 'weak' vowels
- The best known is 'schwa' / ə /
 - A 'lax midish centralish usually unrounded' vowel
 - Occurs in weak (completely unstressed syllables)

Several 'flavors' of reduced vowels

- Schwa is quite similar to /ʌ/ in 'quality'
 - But shorter and a bit higher
- There is also a 'retroflex schwa', which is essentially the same as a 'syllabic r'
- There is a weak /i/ often not recognized in phonetics text
 - Many words spelled with a final 'y' have such a reduced /i/
- Finally there is a reduced /ɪ/

Examples

- ‘baby’ versus ‘ bay bee’
- ‘Rosa’s’ versus ‘roses’ versus ‘Rose Uz’
- Some of these differences are very subtle and take a while to learn to transcribe
- I will give you my ‘best guess’ about them
- For now, don’t worry about the distinctions

Next couple of weeks...

- We'll be concentrating on consonant sounds
- Transcription part of first quiz will include *broad* transcription of all English consonants
- Only the three 'point vowels' [i a u]

Weak vowels anecdote

- The distinction between Lax lower high front (full) vowel / ɪ / and reduced (barred) [ɪ̥] has implications in the wider (?) culture

Puzzle

- Graphic unavailable
- See NPR Sunday puzzle for 10 September 2006
- At:

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6045513>

Answer (my explanation)

- The puzzle master wanted listeners to provide a word in which the letter 'o' was pronounced with the 'short i' sound, that is as / ɪ /.
- The only acceptable answer was 'women'. Alternative answers, such as the second syllable of 'havoc' were rejected because 'the dictionary' says those vowels are schwa.
- Listeners were closer to right than the puzzle master thought.
- The second vowel in a word like 'havoc' is probably a reduced / ɪ / rather than schwa
 - I will occasionally transcribe in class as 'barred' /ɪ/ or as /ɨ/
 - However, in your broad transcriptions for me you can use schwa or even unreduced / ɪ /