

Re: Is "oo" a diphthong?

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Mark Barratt wrote:

- > *Is [my] diphthongized pronunciation of the vowel in*
- > *"too", "whom", "rude", "booze" a peculiarity of my*
- > *local accent (or maybe even of my idiolect), or is*
- > *it a more general feature of English pronunciation?*

I believe the best answer would be that it depends on the speaker's regional accent. Some pronounce it as a diphthong, others don't.

To give another example, I've heard Australian speakers pronounce /u/ as a diphthong that starts with an unrounded back vowel and glides to an unrounded front vowel (i.e., the tongue moves forward while the lips retain a lax, unrounded, half-open position).

- > *The problem I have with the French "tu" and "tout"*
- > *is that they both, to my English ear, sound like the*
- > *word "too" (or "two", if you prefer).*

More generally, many people seem to lose the ability to distinguish or reproduce distinctions between sounds that do not occur in their native language. This tends to happen around puberty, and it's the reason why most people who try to learn another language as adults end up with a "foreign accent" that is difficult or impossible to eliminate. People who were exposed to two or more languages during childhood seem more likely to retain and cultivate an ability to learn new speech sounds than those who were raised unilingually.

Here's another example of the same concept. In the urban west coast dialect of American English (what is often thought of as the "standard" or "accent-free" dialect), /u/ can be heard pronounced both with rounded lips and with unrounded, lax lips. These sounds (neither of which is a diphthong, BTW) are interchangeable allophones in this dialect; many speakers, in fact, are completely unaware that two versions of the sound in question even exist, and they may not be able to "hear" the difference even if it's pointed out to them.

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An inability to distinguish these two sounds, however, can create real problems if one is trying to learn another language in which they are both used (but not equivalent). Romanian, for example, has a vowel (written as "â" or "î") which sounds very much like the unrounded /u/ of west-coast American English -- and as a result, Americans trying to learn Romanian are going to have extreme difficulty distinguishing this particular vowel from the totally distinct vowel written "u", which is always rounded.

Conversely, many Spanish speakers are likely to have great difficulty distinguishing word-initial /j/ and /dʒ/ in English words (e.g., "you" vs. "Jew"), because, to them, these two sounds are interchangeable -- they sound the same (to a Spanish speaker), just as the French "tu" and "tout" sound the same to Mark.

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