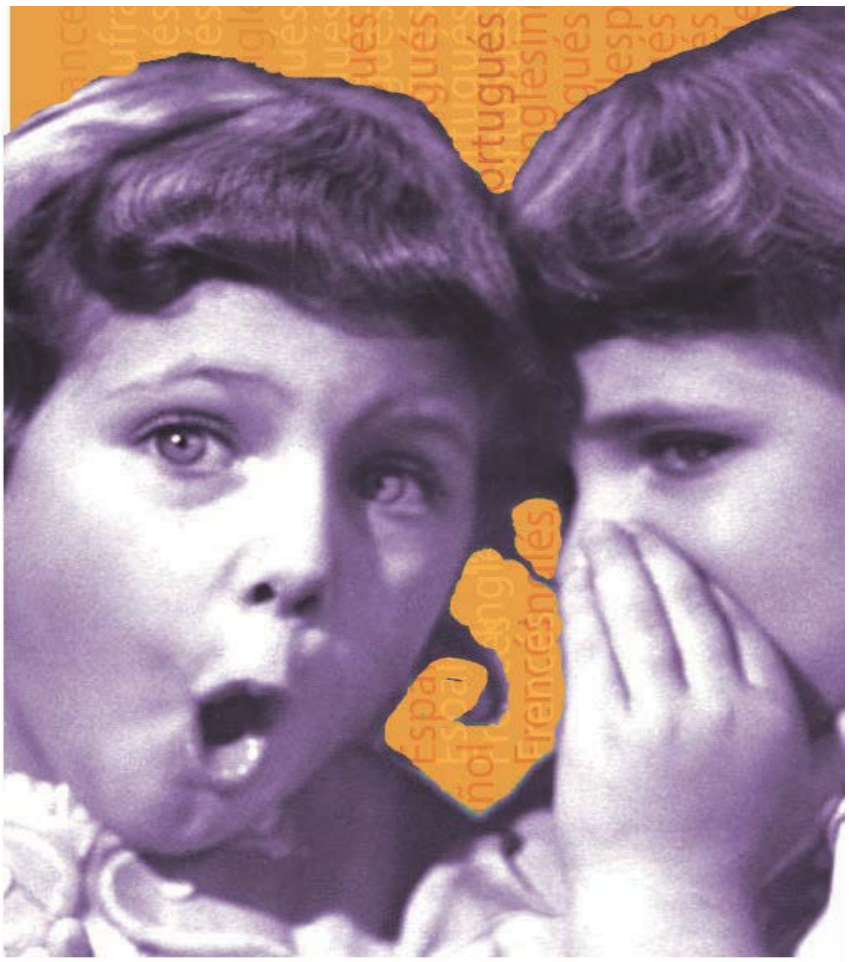
III Jornadas Internacionales



Didáctica de la Fonética de las Lenguas Extranjeras

Editora Gabriela Leiton

UNIVERSIDAD NACIONAL DE SAN MARTÍN

ESCUELA DE HUMANIDADES

CEPEL

III Jornadas Internacionales de Didáctica de la Fonética de las Lenguas Extranjeras / Evangelina Aguirre Sotelo ... [et al.]; editado por Gabriela Delia Leiton. - 1a ed. - San Antonio de Areco: Gabriela Delia Leiton, 2016. Libro digital, PDF

Archivo Digital: descarga
ISBN 978-987-42-1867-4

1. Fonética. 2. Enseñanza de Lenguas Extranjeras. 3. Didáctica. I. Aguirre Sotelo, Evangelina II. Leiton, Gabriela Delia, ed.
CDD 401

III Jornadas Internacionales de Didáctica
de la Fonética de las Lenguas Extranjeras
(alemán, español, francés, inglés, italiano y portugués)

Videoconferencia Inaugural: Prof. Alan Cruttenden

29 y 30 de agosto de 2014

Centro para el Estudio de Lenguas

Escuela de Humanidades

Universidad Nacional de General San Martín

Campus Miguelete - Av. 25 de Mayo y Francia - 1650 San Martín (Bs. As.) - República Argentina www.unsam.edu.ar - Tel. 54 11

4006-1500 int. 1306 - jcepel@unsam.edu.ar – direccioncepel@gmail.com

Organizan

- Centro para el Estudio de Lenguas (Escuela de Humanidades - UNSAM)
- Instituto de Enseñanza Superior en Lenguas Vivas “Juan Ramón Fernández”

Auspician

- Diplomatura y Licenciatura en Lengua Inglesa con orientación en Literatura y Cine
- Diplomatura en Enseñanza de Español como Lengua Segunda y Extranjera
- Diplomatura Universitaria en Pedagogía de la Fonética con orientación en Lengua Inglesa

RECENT (AND NOT SO RECENT) DEVELOPMENTS IN GENERAL BRITISH HIGH ROUNDED VOWELS

Mazzeo, Mariano Pablo, marianomazzeo@hotmail.com

Profesor de Inglés, Prof. Pbro. Dr. Antonio María Sáenz; Adscripto a la materia Expresión Oral I (2002-2003), Prof. Pbro. Dr. Antonio María Sáenz; Diplomado en Pedagogía de la Fonética con orientación en Lengua Inglesa, UNSAM. Prof. De la Diplomatura Universitaria de la Pedagogía de la Fonética, UNSAM.

Abstract

Although traditionally described as back vowels, General British close rounded vowels have been steadily moving forwards for a number of years. This change has been noted by several phoneticians, including Cruttenden (2008), Hughes, Trudgill and Watt (2005), Wells (2012), Lindsey (2012) and Tench (2011). However, perhaps due to the weight of tradition, together with the still rather unstable quality of these sounds, the influence of some American accents and the persistent use of the symbols |ʊ| and |uː|, these vowels are still usually taught as back vowels. In this paper we will not only be referring to the ideas of the authors above, but we will also attempt to explain and support (in the form of acoustic and sociolinguistic analysis) our own ideas about the current state of these changes and what should be taken as a model to follow in the EFL classroom. We will also be considering those special cases where these sounds have remained back, addressing the difficult issue of whether to interpret such cases as allophonic variations, examples of the persevering instability of the sound or a case of lexical split.

Key words: vowels, shift, high, back, front

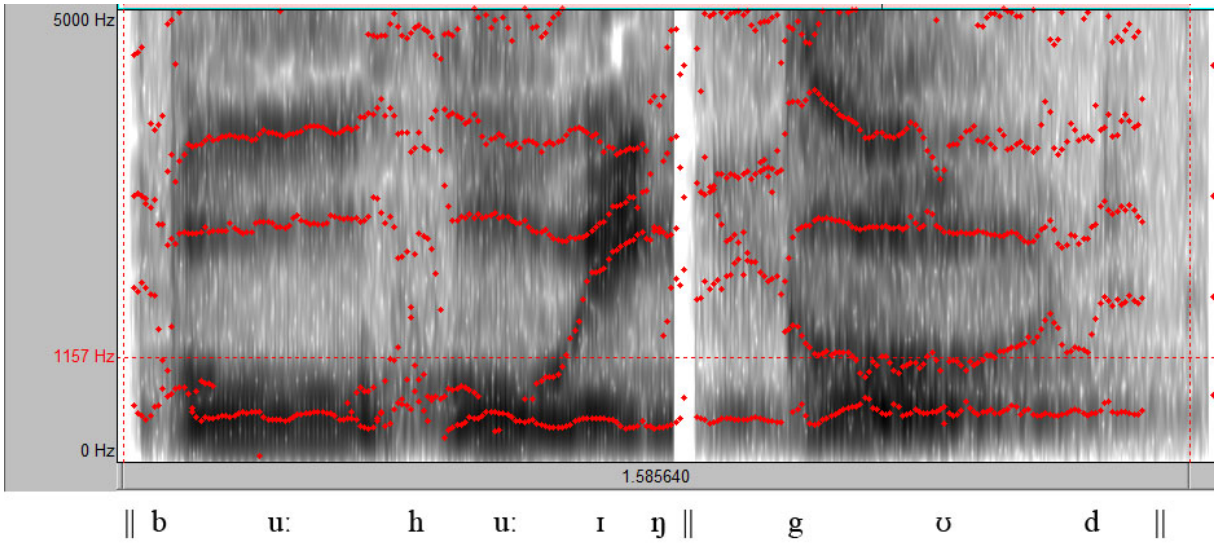
RECENT (AND NOT SO RECENT) DEVELOPMENTS IN GENERAL BRITISH HIGH ROUNDED VOWELS

1. Traditional description

For General British[1], the vowel sounds in the words “foot” and “food” have been traditionally described as close back rounded monophthongs (the former being more advanced and lower than the latter) and have been, accordingly represented by the use of the IPA symbols |ʊ| and |uː|. This remained the standard description until the 1990's, although dipthonization of |uː| (which essentially meant a movement forwards) had been noted since Daniel Jones (1922).

Picture 1 shows a spectrogram of the phrases “boo-hooing” and “good”, pronounced by Rex Harrison playing Professor Henry Higging from the 1964 classic *My Fair Lady.* Notice that the second formant for both |uː|s has a stable phase at around 800 Hz whereas the one for |ʊ| is around 1100 Hz. In other words, these segments seem to correspond well with the description above.

Picture 1



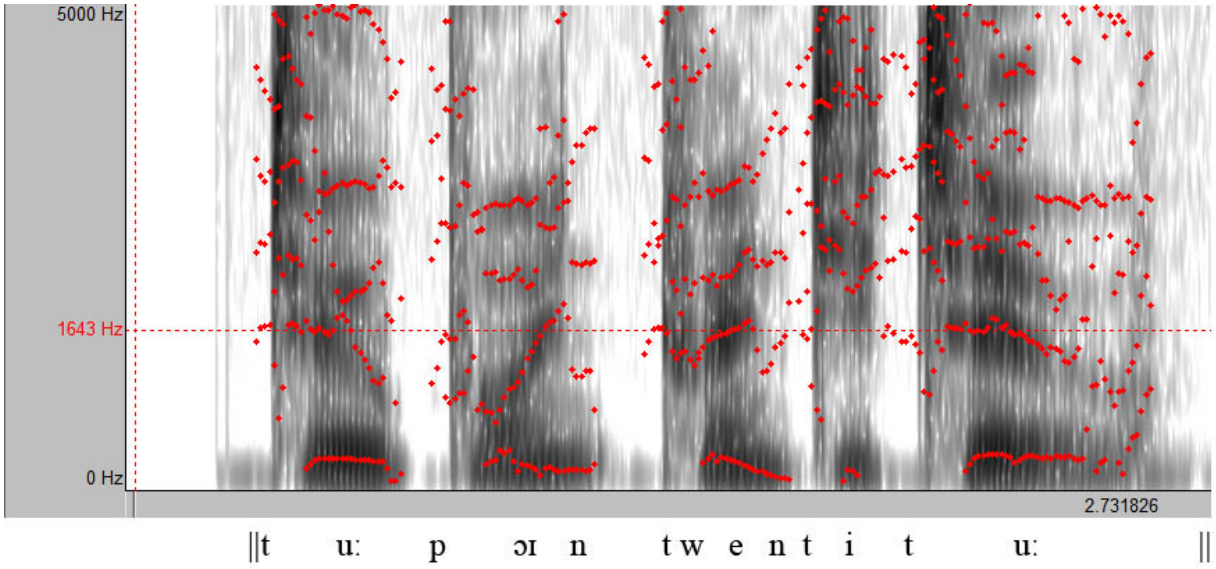
After the year 2000, however, most authors (e.g. Cruttenden [2008]) acknowledge a change for both sounds to a more advanced position.

[1] Following Cruttenden (2014), we will be using the term “General British” to refer to the accent formerly known as “RP”. It should also be noted that, where no specific reference is made, the descriptions in the present paper should be assumed to correspond to such accent.

2. |u:|

Generally speaking, authors agree that this is a central sound often gliding to a back target. Picture 2 is a spectrogram of the phrase “two point twenty-two” spoken by JC Wells for the audio of his book *English Intonation*.

Picture 2

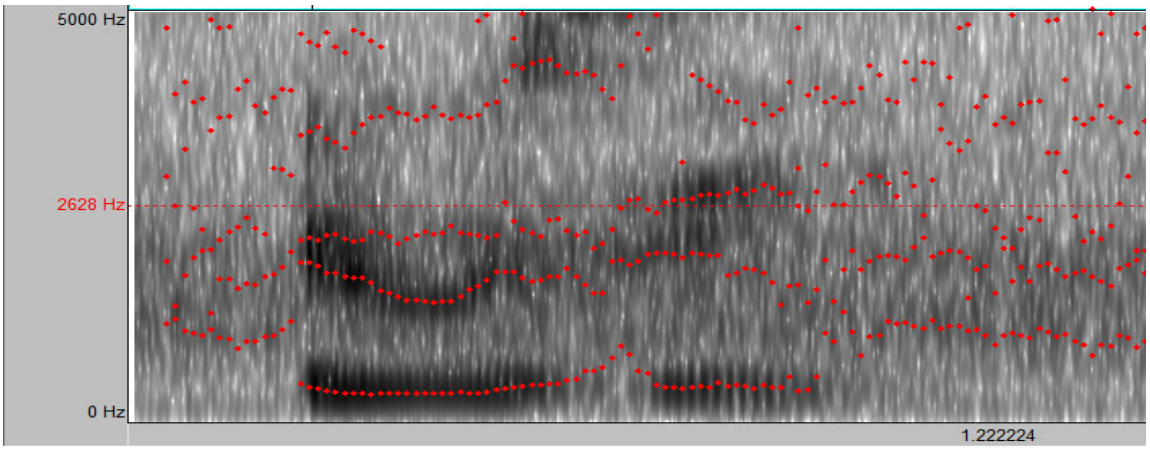


There is disagreement, however, on whether the final glide should be considered as part of the phoneme or as an allophonic variation. Most authors (e.g. Lindsey [2013]) prefer the former approach, but a few others (e.g. Tench [2011]) prefer the latter.

We have to observe that those of the latter group treat dipthongization of |i:| in the same manner. As far as we have been able to observe, however, these two phonemes work differently. Whereas |i:| does seem to go from monophthongal to diphthongal depending on its distribution, diphthongization of |u:| (though not free from variation) is much more stable[2]. Picture 3 is a spectrogram of the word “oozy” (we have already seen examples of |u:| in medial and final positions), taken from *Longman Pronunciation Dictionary*.

[2] We are strictly referring here to the realisation of this segment with an initial central element. We will later be addressing other options.

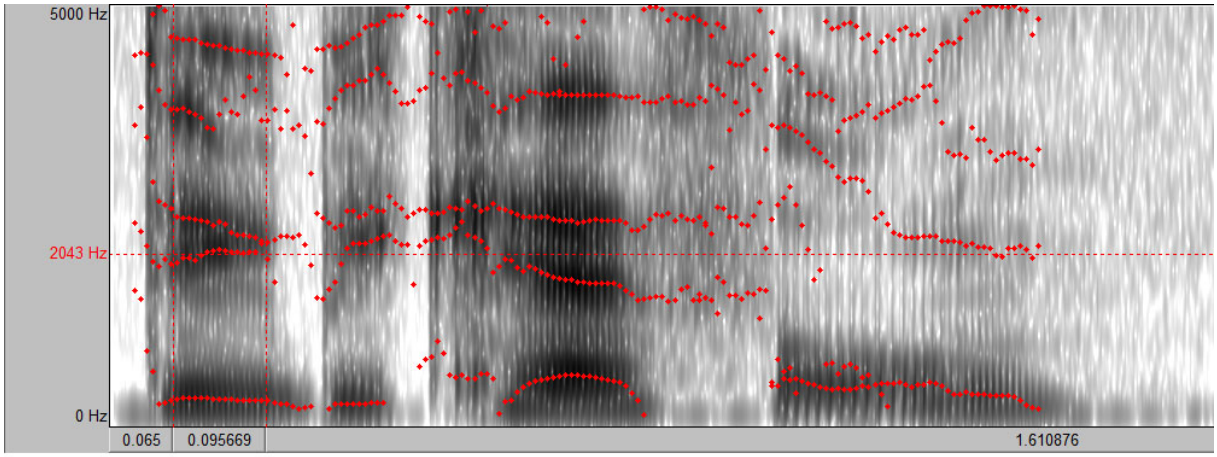
Picture 3



|| u: z i ||

Furthermore; the forward movement of |uː| did not stop at the central position. For many General British speakers (typically but not exclusively young ones) today, this segment may be realised as a front vowel. Picture 4 is a spectrogram of the phrase “Do be careful,” from the recording of Wells's *English Intonation*. Notice the similarity between the second formant for |uː| and those for the next vowels, |iː| and |eə|. Notice as well that this front version of the phoneme does not present dipthongization.

Picture 4



|| d u: b i k eə f l ||

2.a. How should these changes be represented?

As regards the first realisation (central diphthongised), most authors choose |ʊu| (e.g. Roach [1991]), but other options are possible too. For example, Geoff Lindsey (2013) uses |ʉw| and Hughes, Trudgill and Watt (2005) use [ʊ̟ʉ].

Notice that the different transcriptions above do not seem to represent the same sounds. |ʊu| represents a change of height as much as tongue position. |ʉw|, on the other hand, represents exclusively the latter. Finally, [ʊ̟ʉ] seems to represent (aside from the allophonic status we can infer from the use of square brackets and diacritics) exclusively a change in height.[3]

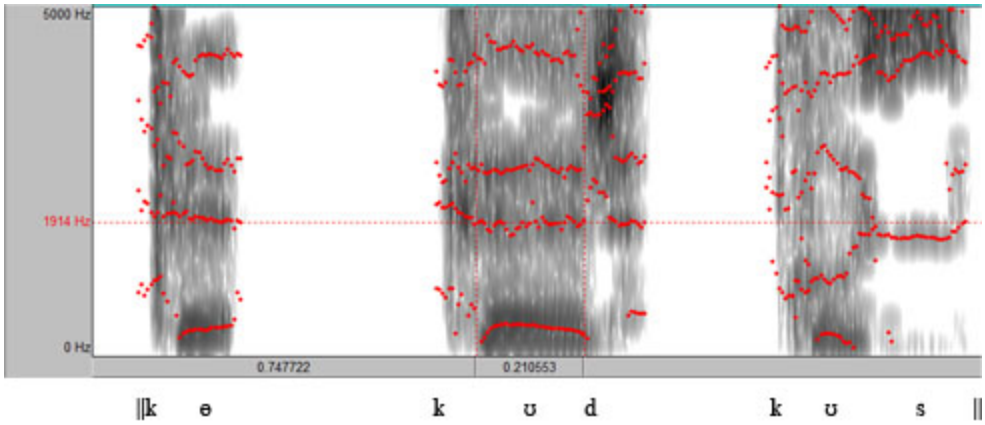
According to what we have observed, a change of the first formant is neither as frequent nor as big as the one for the second. So we have to agree with Lindsey's choice, although we would choose to spell it |ʉu|[4], since we consider |w| as a consonant.

As regards the second realisation (front monophthong), the typical choice is |y|.

3. |ʊ|

There is much more agreement on the way this sound has changed, becoming a central sound. Geoff Lindsey (2012) compares the French “que”, the English “could” and the German “kuss”, all taken from Google Translate. Picture 5 is a spectrogram produced from the resulting sound file.

Picture 5



[3] Some of these authors also acknowledge a change in the level of lip-rounding between the first and second element, the second one being more rounded. But since both elements are rounded, we do not see any need for the phoneme to represent that difference.

[4] Geoff Lindsey had actually used |ʊw| before changing to |ʉw|, and still states in his website that “The first quality is like the vowel of FOOT, which can be described as a rounded fairly close central vowel, [ʉ] or [ʊ].” So whether he meant to represent a change in height or not remains ambiguous.

Notice the similarity between the second formant of “que” and that of “could” and the difference between the latter and that of “kuss”.[5][6]

3.a. How do we represent the change?

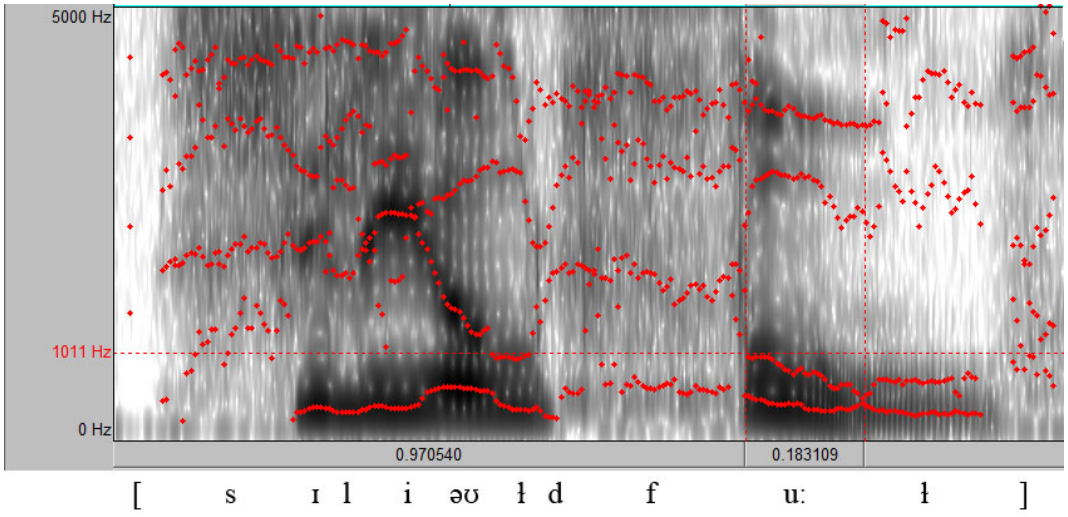
Lindsey (2012) suggests |ɵ|, whereas Cruttenden (2008) prefers |ö|[7]. Since both options have advantages and disadvantages (|ɵ| does not require diacritcs, but |ö| is used in many alphabets of the world), we can equally favour either of them.

4. Allophonic variation?

Both Lindsey (2013) and Wells (2012) speak about an allophonic back version of |uː| before [ɬ]. Picture 6 shows a spectrogram of the phrase “Silly old fool,” from the recoding of *English Intonation*. Notice how low the second formant is.

This is easy to explain with the concept of “variation” (Cruttenden [2008]), |uː| becomes back under the influence of a back sound. There are other cases, however, which are harder to explain, and no author (at least to our knowledge) offers an explanation for them. Picture 7, for instance, shows a spectrogram of the phrase “You oughtn't to eat that pie”, pronounced by the same speaker from picture, and the word “put”, from the audio of Hughes, Trudgill and Watt's *English Accents and Dialects*.

Picture 6

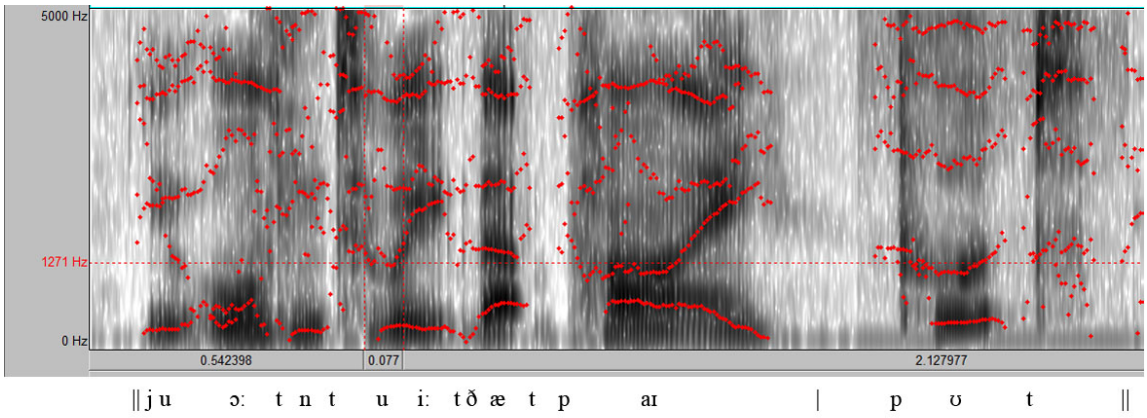


[5] |ɵ | stands for a rounded “schwa”.

[6] It may be argued that this is not real language but the formants in the image coincide quite tightly with our own observations.

[7] Cruttenden also mentions an unrounded allophonic variation present in common words (e.g. “good”), for which he uses the symbol [ɤ̟].

Picture 7



Why would the |u|[8] of “to eat” becomes back before a front sound?[9] What about the |ʊ| of “put”, which is followed by an alveolar sound?

Since we cannot explain this as an allophonic variation, we need to consider other options. The first one is possibility a lexical split, giving us a three-way contrast between close rounded vowels. The very limited number of words where this back sound can not be explained as an allophone, together with the fact that such words are not necessarily pronounced the same way by different speakers and, in some occasion, not even by the same speaker, makes this seem unlikely.

The second option is that of persevering instability. Although, as we pointed out before, the sound is pretty stable, we do find something most of the examples above (and others we have found) seem to have in common. They appear in situations where the speaker may wish to emphasize the quality of the sound; in the first case, to make the two front sounds more distinguishable (dissimilation) and in the second to make the articulation clearer (the word is read as part of a reference list). So it is likely that, due to the rounded nature of these segments (and the lack of other rounded segments in the area they now occupy), these sounds are still perceived by native speakers as back sounds. Much more research is still required on this area, however, before we can reach a conclusion.

[8] |u| is an archiphoneme representing the neutralization of |uː| and |ʊ|.

[9] This could be explained by saying that there is “compression” to |twiːt|, but the problem with this idea is explaining why two front sounds (remember |uː| was front for this speaker) compress into a back-front combination and not into something like |tjiːt| (or |tɥiːt|, if we wish to account for rounding).

5. Conclusion and Didactic Implications

The high rounded vowels of English have been moving forwards. |uː| may vary now between a diphthong with an initial central position and a back target sound (|ʉu|), and a front monophthong (|y|). |ʊ|, in turn, has moved to a central position (|ɵ| or |ö|). There are still occasional back realisations of these vowels, which we have attempted to explain by a persevering native speaker notion of the sound as a back vowel. More research, however, will be necessary in this area.

More research will also be necessary to establish if the diphthongs ending in |ʊ| are also affected by these changes.

The most basic didactic implication of these findings is that we can no longer teach these sounds as back vowels. The central |ʉu| and |ɵ| (|ö|) should be the models to follow and we should keep an eye on the evolution of the front (|y|) realisation.

REFERENCES

Cruttenden, A. 2008: *Gimson's Pronunciation of English*, Sixth Edition. London, UK, Hodder Education.

——— . 2014: *Gimson's Pronunciation of English*, Eighth Edition. London, UK, Hodder Education.

Hughes, A., Trudgill, P. and Watt, D. 2005: *English Accents and Dialects*, Fourth Edition. London, UK, Hodder Education.

Jones, D. 1922: *An Outline of English Phonetics*. New York, G.E. Stechert & Co.

Learner A.J. 1964: *My Fair Lady* [based on Shaw, A.B. 1912: *Pygmalion*.]. California, USA, Warner Bros. Pictures.

Lindsey, G. 2012: *Le FOOT Vowel*, English Speech Services, January 15th, 2012. URL: http://englishspeechservices.com/blog/le-foot-vowel/

——— . 2013: *Goose for Yule?*, English Speech Services, December 24th, 2013. URL: http://englishspeechservices.com/blog/goose-for-yule/

Roach, P. 1991: *English Phonetics and Phonology*, Second Edition. Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press.

Tench, P. 2011: *Transcribing the Sound of English*. New York, USA, Cambridge University Press.

Wells, J.C. 2006: *English Intonation*, An Introduction. New York, USA, Cambridge University Press.

——— . 2008: *Longman Pronunciation Dictionary*, Third Edition. Harlow, UK, Pearson Longman Ltd.

——— . 2012: *newly minimal*, John Wells's phonetic blog, February 3rd, 2012. URL: http://phonetic-blog.blogspot.com.ar/2012/02/newly-minimal.html