

The Vowel Space

Languages

How vowels are described, and why they resist neat letters.

Vowels are classified by tongue height, tongue frontness and lip rounding. Because these vary continuously, vowels form a space rather than a set of discrete sounds.

ENGLISH VOWELS

~20

VOWEL LETTERS

5

COMMONEST

schwa

- Height: close (ee) to open (ah).
- Frontness: front (ee) to back (oo).
- Rounding: oo is rounded; ee is not.
- English has around 20 vowel sounds and five vowel letters.
- Diphthongs glide between two positions: the vowel in 'buy'.
- Schwa /ə/ is the neutral centre, and the commonest vowel in English.

LOOK FOR IT

Accents differ far more in vowels than in consonants — which is why they are hard to imitate.

Schwa appears in unstressed syllables everywhere: the a in 'about', the e in 'taken', the o in 'memory'.