

SPECIAL WORDS

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In two recent articles in this journal (Word Ways 43.4, 2008, and Word Ways 44.1, 2010), Susan Thorpe identifies schwa (i.e. 'ə') as the phonetic symbol of English which can be represented by the most letters of the alphabet. Her examples illustrate that any one of the vowels A, E, I, O, U, Y, the consonant R, or the six bigrams AR, EA, ER, IA, IO, OI, OU can stand for [ə]. A typical example is the word SPECIAL, in which IA is pronounced as [ə]. The running total of schwa-representations is 14: 7 single letters and 7 bigrams. In the following I demonstrate that the number of letter combinations reflecting [ə] can be more than tripled. My source is Webster's Third New International Dictionary (W3).

As noted in the 'Guide to Pronunciation', W3 includes a number of diacritics which accompany [ə] in order to distinguish between various types of schwa, e.g. stressed schwa, unstressed schwa, optional schwa. In the following I do not discuss these fine-grained variants and simply refer to letter combinations corresponding to the phonetic symbol [ə].

Consider first some words in which schwa represents one of the six vowel letters A, E, I, O, U, Y and the five bigrams listed above only containing vowel letters, namely EA, IA, IO, OI, OU. I return to R, AR and ER below. The underlined letters here and elsewhere are transcribed in W3 as [ə].

A: ABOUT, ACROSS, AFRICA, ALARM, ALIAS, MASSAGE, SAGA, STACCATO
E: BEGIN, BEGONIA, COMET, COVEN, HAREM, MAITRESS, WAITRESS
I: COSUSIN, KINETIC, LAMINA, LUBRICANT, MIRAGE, OSCILLATE
O: BROTHER, COME, CORONER, GLOVE, MAGGOT, OPOSSUM, POLITICAL, TOMORROW, VIOLIN
U: ALBUM, ASPARAGUS, CUT, DUST, EVENTFUL, LETTUCE, LOTUS, STATUS, UNDER, USEFUL
Y: CHRYSANTHEMUM, DYSFUNCTION, SYLLABIC, SYNOPSIS, SYRINGE, SYZYGY
EA: NAUSEA, OCEAN, PAGEANT, PEACEEABLE, SERGEANT, VENGEANT
IA: BENEFICIAL, CROATIAN, OFFICIAL, PARLIAMENT, SPECIAL, VENETIAN
IO: ADOPTION, FASHION, NATION, REGION
OI: CONNOISEUR, PORPOISE, TORTOISE
OU: COUNTRY, COUPLE, COUSIN, CREDULOUS, FAMOUS, JEALOUS, ROUGH, TOUCH

Readers familiar with the phonetic symbols employed in OED may note a difference between that source and W3: The former transcribes the underlined vowel in words listed above (and below) as [ʌ] and not as [ə] if that vowel is stressed. Examples of stressed vowels transcribed in OED as [ʌ] can be found in monosyllabic words like CUT and COME as well as disyllables like COUNTRY, UNDER and BROTHER.

I list now additional bigrams consisting of two vowels which can be represented by schwa. The reason why many of these words are special is that they reflect minor spellings for [ə] which can only be found in a small number of items.

AA:	BAL <u>A</u> AM, CAN <u>A</u> AN	EU:	PNEUMON <u>I</u> A
AE:	MICHAEL <u>M</u> AS	IE:	ANC <u>I</u> ENT, PAT <u>I</u> ENT
AI:	BARG <u>A</u> IN, BRIT <u>A</u> IN, CAP <u>T</u> A <u>I</u> N, FOUN <u>T</u> A <u>I</u> N, MOUN <u>T</u> A <u>I</u> N	OE:	DO <u>E</u> S
AU:	BECA <u>U</u> SE, EPA <u>A</u> U <u>L</u> ET, RESTA <u>A</u> UR <u>A</u> NT	OO:	BLO <u>O</u> D, FLO <u>O</u> D
EI:	FORFE <u>I</u> T	UA:	PIQU <u>A</u> NT
EO:	LUNCHE <u>O</u> N, PIGE <u>O</u> N	UI:	CIRCU <u>I</u> T, GUIT <u>A</u> R

The following examples illustrate that a bigram consisting of a vowel and a consonant (or the reverse) can represent [ə]:

AH:	CHEETA <u>H</u> , HALLELU <u>A</u> H, MESS <u>I</u> A <u>H</u> , MULL <u>A</u> H, SAVANNA <u>H</u>	OL:	LINC <u>O</u> L <u>N</u>
ES:	BELLE <u>S</u> -LETT <u>R</u> ES	HA:	BROU <u>G</u> H <u>A</u> M, DUR <u>H</u> A <u>M</u> , FUL <u>H</u> A <u>M</u> , NOTTING <u>H</u> A <u>M</u>
IG:	ENS <u>I</u> G <u>N</u>	UH:	DU <u>H</u> , HU <u>H</u> , U <u>H</u> -HU <u>H</u>

In the next set of words we can observe that various trigrams can be represented as schwa:

EAU:	BUREAU <u>C</u> RAT	IOU:	AMBIT <u>I</u> OUS, DELIC <u>I</u> OUS, RELIG <u>I</u> OUS
EIG:	FORE <u>I</u> GN, SOVERE <u>I</u> GN	OUL:	CO <u>U</u> LD, SHO <u>U</u> LD, WO <u>U</u> LD
EOU:	GASE <u>O</u> US, NAUSE <u>O</u> US, RIG <u>H</u> TE <u>O</u> US	UOU:	TUMULT <u>U</u> OUS, UNCT <u>U</u> OUS

The bigram GH and the tetragram OUGH in the words listed below are both transcribed in W3 with [ə] as one of the possible pronunciations:

GH:	BUR <u>G</u> H, EDINBUR <u>G</u> H
OUGH:	BOROU <u>G</u> H, THOROU <u>G</u> H

The following bigram representing [ə] differs from all of the examples listed above because the linear sequence of letters does not correspond to the linear sequence of sounds represented by those letters:

LE:	CAN <u>D</u> L <u>E</u> , CAS <u>T</u> L <u>E</u> , HAN <u>D</u> L <u>E</u> , PADD <u>L</u> <u>E</u>
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The bigram LE in word-final position in the items listed above is pronounced [əl]. If we assume that the letter L represents the sound [l] and the letter E the sound [ə], then we are forced to conclude that the phonetic symbols have ‘switched places’.

The letter R – usually together with another vowel – is a very common way of representing schwa. In English, R by itself when adjacent to letters depicting consonant sounds is very rare; in those few examples the R is pronounced as [ə]. The bigrams and trigrams listed below are all transcribed in W3 as [ə]. Note particularly the final example in this list with the tetragram YRRH.

R:	<u>BRNO</u>	OR:	<u>ACTOR</u> , <u>AUTHOR</u> , <u>CENSOR</u> , <u>CLAMOR</u> , <u>DOCTOR</u>
AR:	<u>ANGULAR</u> , <u>BEGGAR</u> , <u>POLAR</u> , <u>TARTAR</u>	RE:	<u>ACRE</u> , <u>FIRE</u> , <u>HERE</u> , <u>OGRE</u> , <u>TIRE</u>
ER:	<u>BETTER</u> , <u>CORNER</u> , <u>GANDER</u> , <u>NERVE</u> , <u>PLAYER</u> , <u>RUNNER</u> , <u>SWIMMER</u>	UR:	<u>FEMUR</u> , <u>FUR</u> , <u>LEMUR</u> , <u>SULFUR</u> , <u>TURN</u>
IR:	<u>BIRD</u> , <u>DIRT</u> , <u>MIRTH</u> , <u>STIR</u>	YR:	<u>MARTYR</u> , <u>SATYR</u> , <u>ZEPHYR</u>
EAR:	<u>DEARTH</u> , <u>EARN</u> , <u>EARTH</u>	UOR:	<u>LANGUOR</u> , <u>LIQUOR</u>
EUR:	<u>AMATEUR</u> , <u>JONGLEUR</u>	URE:	<u>INJURE</u> , <u>PLEASURE</u> , <u>TREASURE</u>
IER:	<u>PAPIER</u> <u>MACHE</u> , <u>OSIER</u>	YRRH:	<u>MYRRH</u>
OUR:	<u>ENDEAVOUR</u> , <u>RUMOUR</u>		

The real reason why words containing schwa are special is that [ə] is often pronounced even though it fails to correspond to any letters at all. Examples like this typically involve combinations of consonant sounds at the right or left edge of a word which in English cannot be pronounced without an intervening vowel. Consider the unfamiliar word QUTB ‘an Islamic saint’. If one were told to articulate that word with Q as a [k] sound and U as an [u] sound and if one were also instructed to pronounce the last two letters, then one would inevitably be forced to insert a vowel in between them. The reason for this is that English does not allow words ending in the two sounds [t] and [b]. The vowel speakers of English will typically insert between the T and B in the word QUTB is [ə], and this is precisely the transcription one finds for that word in W3. More familiar items with schwa between two consonant sounds in word-final position include RHYTHM, as well as the many words ending in –ISM, e.g. PRISM and ORGANISM.

Parallel examples involving clusters of consonants at the left edge of a word include KHMER, KNISH, KNAIDEL, KVASS and GDANSK. In all of these items we have [ə] being pronounced after the first consonant (as reflected in W3). In a word like MCJOB we have the pronunciation with [ə] between the spoken [m] (represented by M) and the spoken [k] (represented by C). A similar generalization holds for names beginning with MC which are not listed in W3.

In many contracted forms we similarly have [ə], even though that sound is not reflected in the orthography with a letter. Familiar examples include COULDN’T, DIDN’T, DOESN’T, ISN’T, MUSTN’T, SHOULDN’T and WOULDN’T, in which [ə] is pronounced before the N. Words with ‘LL, ‘VE and ‘ED (all entries in W3) have [ə] before the apostrophe, e.g. WHAT’LL YOU HAVE, WHAT’VE YOU GOT, WHAT’D YOU SAY.

Here are two questions for readers of Word Ways: (i) A number of letter combinations listed above only rarely reflect the pronunciation schwa, e.g. AA, AE, EI, ES, OE, IG, OL, OO, UI, IER, UOR. How many special words are there for these bigrams and trigrams other than the ones listed above? (ii) Are there other combinations of letters which represent [ə] which I neglected to mention?