

“Come On Eileen” Misheard Song Lyrics Understood Through Linguistics

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Introduction

This research poster investigates the reasoning behind the misheard song lyrics from the famous 1982 Album *Too-Rye-Ay* song “Come on Eileen” by Dexy’s Midnight Runners. This song contains many misheard lyrics that can be explained through the examination of the dynamic linguistic structure.

The specific lyrics I focused on were “And we can sing just like our fathers, come on, Eileen” the audience commonly mistakes this phrase for “And wiccan sing just like a boulder, Come on, Ali” with the underlined parts being the misheard sections. In order to understand why some people mishear these lyrics, I first translate them using the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) which is shown in figure 1, then I dissected the lyrics in the order they come in. My purpose is to show that linguistics can explain misheard song lyrics. Figure 2 in the results section demonstrates where and how the vowels and diphthongs are articulated by acting like a mouth diagram (/e/ is made mid central in the mouth).

A Phonetic Alphabet for American English									
CONSONANTS					VOWELS AND DIPHTHONGS				
p ^h	pill	t ^h	till	k ^h	kill	i	beat	ə	sofa
p	spill	t	still	k	skill	ɪ	bit	ʌ	but
b	bill	d	dill	g	gill	e	bait	au	cow
f	fill	θ	thin	ʃ (ʒ)	shell	ɛ	bet	aɪ	buy
v	villa	ð	then	ʒ (ʒ)	measure	æ	bat	ɔɪ	boy
l	lily	s	sin	tʃ (č)	chill	ɑ	pot		
w	will	z	zebra	ʤ (j)	jelly				
m	mill	n	nil	ŋ	sing				
r	rent	j (y)	yes	h	hill				
		r	later	ʔ	uh_oh!				

Research

- Seventh Edition *Language: Its Structure and Use* by Edward Finegan provided research material for the process of translating the lyrics into the Phonetic version in order to first compare the correct lyrics with the incorrect lyrics.
- Kissthisguy.com an archive of misheard lyrics that show hundreds of song lyrics that have been misheard over the years.

Correct translated lyrics: /ænd wi ken sɪŋ dʒʌst laɪk ər fəðərz, kʌm an, aɪlɪn/

Original: were “And we can sing just like our fathers, come on, Eileen”

Incorrect translated lyrics:/ænd wɪkən sɪŋ dʒʌst laɪk ə bouldər, kʌm an, æli/

Original incorrect: “And wiccan sing just like a boulder, Come on, Ali”

1. “Wiccan” instead of “We can”
 - Transposition between /ɪ/ and /i/ in which the former (lax vowel) is shorter and easier to articulate.
 - The clipping of the /i/ sound that resembles the /ɪ/ sound you’d hear in the word “wiccan”.
 - In pronouncing the initial /W/ sound, there is a consistent flow of air that makes going into the proceeding sound of /ɪ/ easier than the /i/ which has restricted airflow due to the articulation at the roof of the mouth (palatal).
 - “we can” is said at a fast pace the /e/ phoneme in /wɪ ken/ is deleted from the pronunciation turning into /wɪkn/.
2. “Like a boulder” instead of “Like our fathers”
 - the sound /k/ (velar stop) in “like” shares the same burst of air, with

- the sound /k/ (velar stop) in “like” shares the same burst of air, with no restriction, as the /ə/ for “a” which is easier than going into a diphthong /aʊ/ sound that requires more thought into the placement of the tongue.
- the sound /r/ in “our” is deleted due to the difficulty in moving from the /aʊ/ place of articulation to the /r/ palatal position.
 - The /f/ sound in “father” is a labio-dental sound and has a similar place of articulation as the sound /b/ a bilabial stop.

3. “Ali” instead of “Eileen”
 - he complex diphthong /aɪ/ sound that requires three different movements; the central low vowel /a/ sound must travel to front high /ɪ/ sound and then to the alveolar liquid /l/ sound.
 - the sound /æ/ is a middle ground between the /a/ and the /ɪ/.
 - the sounds /a/ and /æ/ have a consistent airflow at the lower section of the mouth only being disrupted when the /ɪ/ sound is combined with /a/.

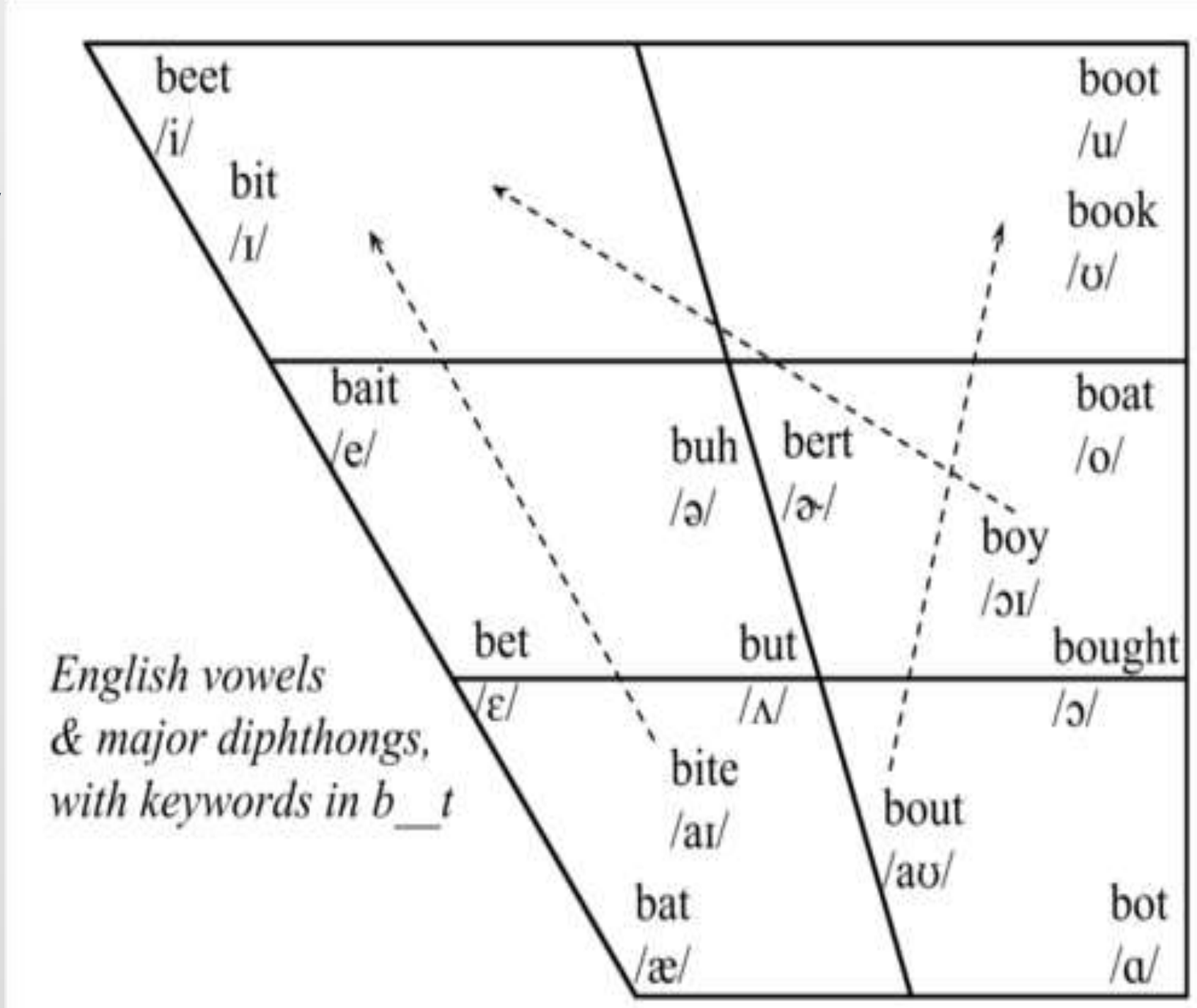
Results

When a person is singing, they are producing constant airflow that can be taxing on the persons articulation of words. The pace also plays a factor in the mishaps of saying a word like “wiccan” instead of “we can”. There is no pause between these two words causing them to blend.

The manner of articulation in the mouth is also a factor because the singer places their tongue in a different position that is similar to the original sound such as the /b/ and /f/ sound in the second phrase.

Also, the air flow created can differ causing the intended sound to change into other word like “our father” and “a boulder” .

(to the left is figure 2)



Conclusion

The linguistic structure can be used to understand why people mishear lyrics from their favorite artists. For me “Come On Eileen” by Dexy’s Midnight Runners contained different attributes the best explained the reason why artists and audience hear and say different lyrics; the science behind the sound's humans make to communicate was the reason. By dissecting the manner of articulation of your lips and tongue, the air flow created through the nose or mouth, and the outside factors such as the person pace, tiredness, origin of speech all have proven to change the lyrics in songs heard on the radio today. Where and how we make sounds can be changed by simple things and create unintentional meanings to be conveyed to the audience, sometimes without the artist even knowing, and due to linguistic rules, I have learned I was able to figure out what exactly caused these certain lyrics from “Come On Eileen” to change.

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- Language: Its Structure and Use Seventh Edition