



An Investigation of the Phonological Adjustments in English Connected Speeches

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ABSTRACT

The phonological adjustments in English connected speeches reflect native speakers (NS) attempts to connect words and syllables smoothly in normal speech. Although these seem to be smooth and somehow natural for native speakers, non-native speakers (NNS) of English have many problems with these suprasegmental features of speech. Learners often try to pronounce each word clearly, thus making their speeches sound unnatural. This study highlights the features and adjustments in connected speeches which include such items as the weak forms of grammatical and some lexical words, intrusion and linking, assimilation, dissimilation, elision and deletion and epenthesis. Examples were given to curtail L1 speakers' phonological processes in English.

Key Words: linking, assimilation, dissimilation, deletion, epenthesis, phonological processes, connected speeches.

INTRODUCTION

A connected speech is the natural way we speak, linking together and emphasising certain words, rather than each word standing alone. One major factor in fluency is speed. As people speak quickly, words are taken in groups which are continuous and they may have pauses between them. This causes changes to the shape of words otherwise known as phonological adjustments. This is a problem that confronts all students of English, that is, the way that individual sounds change in connected speech (i.e., intrusion, linking, assimilation, elision, and weak forms). This can mean that students

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simply turn off when listening to English being spoken as it seems too difficult to follow without a high level of concentration. You hear such complaints as “English people speak so fast.” For example, a complex sentence such as “I asked him what the time was” can be analysed after the students have worked out what the words are. The ‘k’ in asked and ‘h’ him sounds disappear in this piece of connected speech and this is an example of elision.

Statement of Problem

Many problems of L2 understanding derive from the nature of the target language and from the variation and inconsistencies within the acoustic-phonetic signal to which it gives rise. In spoken discourse, we adapt our pronunciation to our audience and articulate with maximal economy of movement rather than maximal clarity. Thus certain words are lost and certain phonemes linked together as we attempt to get our message across.

Adjustments in Connected Speeches

The most common features of connected speech are the weak forms of grammatical and some lexical words (and, to, of, have, was, were) and contractions, some of which are acceptable in written English (can't, won't, didn't, I'll, he'd, they've, should've). However, we often ignore other features which preserve rhythm and make the language sound natural. The most common of these are:

- **Elision** (losing sounds)
- **Intrusion and Linking** (adding or joining sounds between words)
- **Assimilation** (changing sounds)
- **The use of Schwa**

Added to these is the use of the **schwa**, the most common vowel sound in English. Many unstressed vowel sounds tend to become schwa, and because it is an important feature of weak forms, learners should be able to recognise and produce it.

Schwa /ə/

Schwa is the most common vowel sound in English. In stress-timed languages such as English, stresses occur at regular intervals. The words which are most important for communication of the message, that is, nouns, main verbs, adjectives and adverbs, are normally stressed in connected speech. Grammar words such as auxiliary verbs, pronouns, articles, linkers and prepositions are not usually stressed, and are reduced to keep the stress pattern regular. This means that they are said faster and at a lower volume than stressed syllables, and the vowel sounds lose their purity, often becoming a schwa.

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The most common features of connected speech are the weak forms of grammatical and some lexical words (and, to, of, have, was, were) and contractions such as can't, won't, didn't, I'll, h'd, they've, should've. We are using weak form when we pronounce **is** as /s/ rather than /ɪz/ or we pronounce from as /frəm/ rather than /frɪm/. Unstressed words always sound different when used in a sentence as opposed to being said in isolation. Many unstressed vowel sounds tend to become schwa and it is an important feature of weak forms. Grammar words such as auxiliary verbs, pronouns, articles, linkers and prepositions are not usually stressed and are reduced to keep the stress pattern regular. They are said faster and at a lower volume than stressed syllables and the vowel sounds lose their purity, often becoming a schwa /ə/. While stressed syllables maintain the full vowel sound, unstressed syllables are weakened. For example, the letters in bold in the following words can all be pronounced with a schwa (depending on the speaker's accent): support, banana, excellent, experiment, colour, sister, and picture.

Other examples are:

1. How many brothers and sisters have you got?
2. How often do you play tennis?
3. What kind of music do you like?
4. What time do you usually get up?
5. How much does it cost?

Below is a table of some words, the strong forms and weak equivalent:

Words	Strong form	Weak Form
A	/eɪ/	/ə/
Am	/æm/	/əm/ or /m/

This is to show that English is not spoken by every vowel being given its full sound. These features often preserve rhythm and make the language sound natural.

Intrusion and Linking

When two vowel sounds meet, we tend to insert an extra sound which resembles a /j/, /w/ or /r/, to mark the transition sound between the two vowels, a device referred to as intrusion.

Intrusive R - regardless of spelling an /r/ sound is inserted between vowels at a word boundary to ease pronunciation at a word boundary when a word that ends in a weak vowel precedes a word that starts with a vowel, as in a villa **in** Spain, also when /r/ appears between two vowels in words such as draw**ing** or at a word boundary between two vowels in phrases such as law **and** order or we saw **it**

- and so I ended up going to India**r/ afterwards**
- The media **/r/** are to blame.

- Law/r/and order.

A useful way of practising the intruding sounds /r/, /w/ and /j/ is when studying phrasal verbs.

- Do/ **w** /up
- Play / **j** / up
- Go/ **w** /away
- Go/ **w** /out

- **Intruding / j /**

I / **j** / agree.

They / **j** /are here!

- **Intruding / w/**

I want to/ **w**/eat.

Please do/ **w**/it.

Linkage of Sounds

When listening to English at normal speed you will note that we move smoothly from one word to the next, so that there aren't pauses between words. This can be seen in the most basic expressions: Thanks a lot. (Thanksə sounds like a single, two-syllable word), and the most elementary of sentences: I'm a student (I'mə ...). Pausing after every word sounds artificial. Indicate linkage in board summaries for all classes. Treat groups of words and phrases as they come up in a course:

- could have = couldəv;
- must have = mustəv;
- might have = mightəv;
- two weeks ago = two weeksəgo;
- three years ago = three yearsəgo

Linking R- /r/ is pronounced between vowels at a word boundary to ease pronunciation when /r/ occurs at the end of a word and preceding a word that starts with a vowel in phrases such as carr alarm, fourr iron and therere is

- You know, having to get off the tractor and more-or-less push it in under an arch that was too low for it.

- Also the linking /r/ in: here and there; better and better; closer and closer; mother and father, power and might, pray for us.

Assimilation

This is another adjustment in connected speech in which a given sound takes on the characteristics of a neighbouring sound. It is defined as "a process whereby a segment changes to become more like a nearby segment, usually adjacent to it" (McGregor 2009:280). For instance, the final consonant in the word ten with a 'n' sound changes to 'm' sound for the same consonant in the

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phrase 'ten pence.' This change is because our lips are preparing for the 'p' in pence. It eases the process of moving from one sound to another. This kind of phenomena are known as connected speech processes and they occur naturally whenever we speak in utterances of more than one syllable.

Assimilation can be total or partial. It is total when one segment becomes identical with another. Partial assimilation is when one segment becomes more like, but not identical with another. Assimilation rules in languages reflect coarticulation – the spreading of phonetic features either in the anticipation or in the perseveration (the 'hanging on') of articulation processes. The rules stem from articulatory processes as the tendency is to ease articulation or articulate efficiently.

Intolerant [Int^hlɔrənt].

[Imp^hsəbəl].

Many assimilation rules exist in English and other languages. The vowel nasalization rule is an assimilation rule, or a rule that makes neighbouring segments more similar by duplicating a phonetic property. The auditory effect of assimilation is that words sound smoother. Secondly, the voiced /z/ of the English regular plural suffix is changed to [s] after a voiceless sound; similarly, the voiced /d/ of the English regular past tense suffix is changed to [t] after a voiceless sound. These are instances of voiced assimilation, e.g. /kæt + z/ [kæts]. The negative morpheme prefix spelled in- or im- agrees in place or articulation with the word to which it is prefixed, so we have impossible

Below are some assimilation processes:

1. /t/ changes to /p/ before /m//b/or/p/

Basket maker mixed bag

first base right pair

2. /d/ changes to /b/ before /m//b/or/p/

Bad pain good cook

Blood bank good morning

Blood bath grand master

3. /n/ changes to /m/ before /m//b/or/p/

Brown bear open book

Chicken breast sun blind

Common market pen pal

4. /t/ changes to /k/ before /k/or/g/

Cigarette card short cut

Fat girl street cry

Fat girl flat cap

5. /d/ changes to /g/ before /k/or/g/

Hard copy bad girl

Bed call field glasses

Red carpet second class cold cream

6. /n/ changes to /ŋ/ before /k/or/g/

Action group open court Roman calendar

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Common good	tin can	Roman catholic
Golden gate	garden cress	
7. <u>/s / changes to /□/ before /□/ or /j /</u>		
Bus shelter	nice yacht	
Dress shop	space shuttle	
Nice shoes		
8. <u>/z / changes to /□/ before /□/ or /j /</u>		
Cheese shop	rose show	where's yours?
These sheep		
9. <u>/θ/ changes to /s / before /s /</u>		
Bath salts	bath seat	earth science
Birth certificate	both sexes	fifth set
Fourth summer	fourth season	

Dissimilation

Dissimilation is the reverse of assimilation. It is a situation “in which a segment becomes less similar to another segment” (Fromkin, Rodman & Hyams 2007: 277). It is sometimes easier to articulate dissimilar sounds. The difficulty of tongue twisters like “the sixth sheik’s sixth sheep is sick” is based on repeated similarity of sounds. For ease of pronunciation, one can make the words less similar. Dissimilation is a device for easing pronunciation, for example, fricative dissimilation rule. This rule applies to sequences of /fθ/ and /sθ/, changing them to [ft] and [st]. Here the fricative /θ/ becomes dissimilar to the preceding fricative by becoming stop. For example, the words fifth and sixth come to be pronounced as if they were spelled fift and sikst.

Elision and Deletion

As I have mentioned, a native speaker's aim in connecting words is maximum ease and efficiency of tongue movement when getting our message across. In minimizing our efforts, we weaken our articulation. If articulation is weakened too much, the sound may disappear altogether, a process known as elision. It is the vowels from unstressed syllables which are the first to be elided in non-precise pronunciation.

Deletion is a fairly radical form of adjustment whereby sounds disappear or are not clearly articulated in certain contexts. It is often common in casual or rapid speech. Deletion is sometimes represented in English orthography but provides great confusion for those new learners, as the process is quite pervasive. The unstressed vowels as in the following examples are often deleted: mystery, general, memory, funeral, vigorous, Barbara (Fromkin, Rodman & Hyams 2007:279). In casual speech, these words sound as if they were written ‘mystry, genral, memry, funral, vigorous, Barbra.’

Some Common Sound Deletions

A syllable containing the unstressed "schwa" or is often lost. For example,

- int(e)rest,
- sim(i)lar,
- lib(a)ry,
- diff(e)rent,
- t(o)night.

• **/ t / and / d /**

With consonants, it is / t / and / d / which are most commonly elided, especially when they appear in a consonant cluster. For example,

- chris(t)mas
- san(d)wich

The same process can occur across word boundaries, for example,

- mus(t) be
- the firs(t) three
- you an(d) me
- we stopp(ed) for lunch

• **/ h /**

The / h / sound is also often deleted. For example,

- you shouldn't (h)ave
- tell (h)im.

Other more typical environments for deletion include:

1. The loss of /t/ when /nt/ is between two vowels or before syllabic [l]; for example, winter becomes /win□r/.
2. Another insidious form of deletion is the loss of an unstressed medial vowel, e.g., black and white /blæk.ən.waɪt/.
3. In a similar fashion, when a word or syllable ending in a consonant cluster is followed by a word or syllable with a vowel, the final consonant of the cluster is many times pronounced as part of the following syllable. In many cases, this is called resyllabification. Example, Called in /kɔ:lɪdɪn/.
4. Another indication of segment deletion is the case of silent g as in words like paradigm, sign and design. This is an indication of a deeper phonological process. Our knowledge of phonology accounts for the phonetic differences between sign and signature, paradigm and paradigmatic, design and designation. The rule could be delete a /g/ when it occurs before a final consonant or delete a /g/ when it occurs word initially before a nasal consonant or before a word final nasal as in malign, phlegm, and paradigm.
5. When two identical consonants come together as a result of the juxtaposition of two words, there is one single, extended articulation of the medial consonant. That is, native speakers will not produce the medial sound twice. Example, Quit _____ talking
[t] /kwɪ.takɪŋ/

6. When a stop consonant is followed by another stop or by an affricate, the first stop is not released which facilitate the linking. Example, red car /r□.kar/

CONCLUSION

The sounds of normal spoken English are different from the carefully spoken or written form. Students should develop the skill of recognising known words and identifying word division in fast connected speech. This is because phonology is a system and to achieve a natural rhythm in speech, there is need to understand the stress-timed nature of English and the interrelated components of stress, connected speech and intonation.

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