

MODIFICATIONS OF VOWELS IN CONNECTED SPEECH: A GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING NATURAL LANGUAGE FLOW

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Abstract: In spoken language, vowels often change their sound due to the influence of connected speech. These modifications make communication more efficient and fluent, yet they can present challenges for language learners and linguists alike. This article explores the main types of vowel modifications—vowel reduction, elision, assimilation, diphthongization, monophthongization, coarticulation, and weak forms—and discusses their significance in natural speech.

Key words: Coarticulation, assimilation, elision, reduction, vowels sound, syllables.

Introduction

Language, at its core, is about communication. However, the way we pronounce words in isolation is often quite different from how we speak them in natural, connected speech. One of the most significant areas of change lies in the vowels, which undergo a variety of modifications to make speech flow more smoothly. These vowel changes are not only a natural part of language but also provide a fascinating glimpse into the efficiency of human communication. Any sound, whether used in speech or otherwise, can be characterised in terms of its quality. **Sound quality** refers to a specific set of acoustic properties that distinguishes one sound from another. Being about language, this book is concerned with **speech sounds**, sounds produced by human beings for the purposes of linguistic communication. This definition encompasses the two branches into which the study of speech sounds divides:

- **Phonetics** deals with the articulatory capabilities of the vocal tract, and therefore with an ability shared by all human beings. These capabilities are the object of *articulatory phonetics*, the branch of phonetics that we deal with in this chapter. Articulatory phonetics studies how speech sounds are produced (articulated) in the human vocal tract. *Auditory phonetics* and *acoustic phonetics* constitute further sub-branches of phonetics, not dealt with in this book. Auditory phonetics studies the mechanisms involved in speech audition, i.e. how listeners perceive speech sounds, while acoustic phonetics studies the physical characteristics of speech sounds.

Understanding these modifications is essential for linguists, language learners, and speech professionals, as it sheds light on how spoken language operates in real-world contexts. This article will discuss the primary types of vowel modifications in connected speech and their roles in producing fluent speech.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In talking about sounds, we need to keep in mind that there is often no one-to-one correspondence between speech sounds and their spellings. So, we need to (re)train ourselves to listen to speech instead of reading printed forms of it. Here are a few examples of sound-spelling discrepancies in English. The words *threw* and *through* are pronounced in exactly the same way, as are *knows* and *nose*: when spoken out of context, we can't tell which is "witch". Conversely, the English letter sequence – *ough* has several different pronunciations, as in words like *cough*, *dough* or *through*, and the sound [k] can be spelt in at least eight different ways, as shown by the bolded letters of the following words:

(5.1) *tack*, *cat*, *mechanic*, *squid*, *beak*, *acquire*, *accordion*, *grotesque*

1. Vowel Reduction

In connected speech, unstressed vowels often lose their clarity and reduce to a more central sound, such as the schwa /ə/. This process, known as vowel reduction, is one of the most common modifications in English. Vowel reduction allows speakers to emphasize more important parts of a sentence, usually by simplifying less important words.

Example:

The word "to" in isolation is pronounced /tu:/, but in a phrase like "going to," it often reduces to /tə/. Similarly, "can" in "I can go" may be pronounced as /kən/, where the vowel sound is less distinct.

Significance:

Vowel reduction contributes to the natural rhythm of English, which relies heavily on alternating stressed and unstressed syllables. By simplifying unstressed syllables, speakers maintain this rhythm, making their speech sound more fluid.

2. Vowel Elision

Elision refers to the complete deletion of a vowel sound within a word or between words in connected speech. This is particularly common in fast or informal speech, where efficiency is prioritized.

Example:

In the word "camera," which in careful speech is pronounced /'kæməɾə/, the second vowel may be dropped, resulting in /'kæmrə/. Another example is "interesting," which may be pronounced /'intrəstɪŋ/ rather than /'intərəstɪŋ/.

Significance:

Elision helps speed up speech by removing certain sounds altogether. While it may make understanding slightly more challenging for listeners, it greatly contributes to the economy of spoken language.

3. Assimilation of Vowels

Assimilation usually occurs when sounds are influenced by their neighboring sounds, and although it's more common with consonants, vowels can also be affected by this process.

Example:

In the phrase "did you" /dɪd ju:/, the /ɪ/ sound in "did" may be slightly altered due to the /j/ sound in "you," causing the vowel to shift in quality. This often results in a smoother transition between sounds, even if the vowel modification is subtle.

Significance:

Assimilation allows for smoother transitions between sounds in rapid speech, contributing to the seamless quality of natural language.

4. Diphthongization and Monophthongization

Diphthongization occurs when a single vowel sound (monophthong) shifts to a two-part sound (diphthong) in connected speech, while monophthongization is the opposite—where a diphthong simplifies to a monophthong.

Example:

In some dialects or rapid speech, the word "I" /aɪ/ may reduce to a more central vowel sound, such as /ə/, when used in phrases like "I dunno" /ə dənəʊ/. Conversely, a word with a monophthong like "go" /ɡoʊ/ might sound slightly diphthongized in other dialects.

Significance:

These modifications can indicate regional accents or levels of formality in speech, adding diversity and expressiveness to the language.

5. Coarticulation

Coarticulation occurs when sounds are produced in a way that overlaps slightly with neighboring sounds, allowing for faster speech. This happens subtly with vowels as well.

Example:

In "see you" /si: ju:/, the /i:/ sound may become slightly shorter or centralized due to the /j/ sound that follows, allowing the two sounds to blend together more naturally.

Significance:

Coarticulation enhances speech fluency, reducing the physical effort needed to produce each sound individually.

6. Weak Forms

English contains many words with both strong and weak forms, and the weak form usually involves vowel reduction. These weak forms are prevalent in functional words, such as articles, prepositions, and auxiliary verbs.

Example:

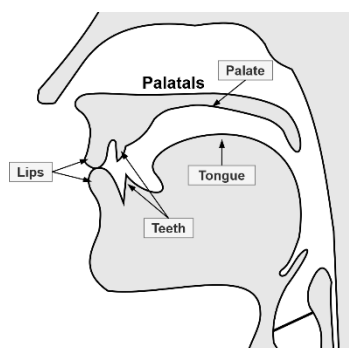
The word "and" has a strong form /ænd/, but in connected speech, it's often reduced to /ən/ or even just /n/ in phrases like "bread and butter."

Significance:

Weak forms are integral to English's prosody, contributing to its characteristic rhythm by deemphasizing non-essential words and focusing on the main content words of the sentence.

Blending (Palatalization)

A very common sound change in English connected speech is blending, sometimes called **palatalization**. Blending happens when the tongue touches the palate while a consonant is being pronounced. Look at the picture and locate the palate.



With your fingers again in place on your larynx, say a long *zzzz* as in the beginning of the word *zap* and a long *vvvv* as in the beginning of the word *vat*, loud and clear. Next, say a long *ssss* (*sap*) and *ffff* (*fat*) sound. Did you notice that the first two sounds are voiced and the last two are voiceless? For a more dramatic contrast, say the same sounds with your hands over your ears, blocking them off. The two voiced sounds *zzzz* and *vvvv* produce a buzzing vibration, caused by voicing, inside your head, whereas the two voiceless sounds *ssss* and *ffff* produce a turbulent hiss of air.

Oral vs. nasal sounds

Try the following

With the tip of your tongue, touch the roof of your mouth. You'll feel a bony surface, called the **hard palate**. Now drag the tip of your tongue back along the hard palate, as far back as it will go. You will notice that at the very back there is no bone: this is the **soft palate**, or **velum**.

Now close your lips tightly, and hum. Notice that you don't need to use your jaw at all to make your voice heard. Sounds that are produced as you hum involve using your nasal cavity: you produce them as air flows out through your nose. When we produce speech sounds, the soft palate can be in one of these two states:

- *Raised* against the top part of your pharynx, which is the back wall of your throat. When raised, the soft palate blocks the airflow to the nasal cavities, resulting in **oral** sounds.
- *Lowered*, causing the air to flow through the nasal cavities, as when you hum, resulting in **nasal** sounds.

CONCLUSION

The modifications of vowels in connected speech reflect the natural, efficient, and adaptive nature of spoken language. By using processes such as reduction, elision, assimilation, diphthongization, and weak forms, speakers can convey their thoughts fluidly without sacrificing clarity. While these vowel modifications can pose challenges for language learners, they are essential to achieving native-like fluency and understanding the dynamic nature of language.

Studying vowel modifications not only enriches our understanding of linguistics but also allows us to appreciate the subtle complexities of everyday speech. For language learners and educators, recognizing and practicing these modifications can lead to improved listening comprehension and more authentic spoken communication.

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