Speech Simplification Strategies in English[1]

Josephat B. Maghway

Department of Foreign Languages and Linguistics,
University of Dar es Salaam

Abstract

Speakers of English, of whichever accent, base their speech on the phonemes of their accent. Speakers do not, however, speak with any articulatory purity to manifest each phoneme in its ideal phonetic features. This is a consequence of the contextual influence which adjacent phonemes subject phonemes in their neighbourhood. Some of these influences are due to natural phonetic environments of phonemes; others are consciously effected by speakers in order to simplify their speech. The most important speech simplifications that result are ***assimilation****,* ***elision****,* ***liaison*** *and* ***l-darkening****.*

Introduction

An area that is generally neglected in the teaching of spoken English is what happens to the phonemes of the language (in whatever accent) in connected fluent and – especially - colloquial speech, i.e. rapid informal or casual conversational speech. The result of such neglect tends to be connected speech in English, where there is an apparent attempt to articulate each phoneme in the stream of speech as precisely as in a dictation or citation pronunciation of each word or phoneme independently of all the other words or phonemes in that stream of speech.[2] Such speech is, needless to underscore, boring, tedious or downright unnatural to the native or proficient speaker.

[1] Our discussion here is based on the Received Pronunciation (RP) accent of British spoken English. Nevertheless, what is said in the discussion is equally applicable to other accents of English, British or otherwise.

[2] What is more, in the manner in which English is spoken in Tanzania – when it is, there is a further tendency to pronounce English words as written (i.e. phonetic or spelling pronunciation as) as they do in Swahili (see Maghway, 1981: 19-54).

In normal connected speech, in contrast to citations or individual articulations of phonemes or phoneme sequences in words, none of the phonemes of English (of RP or any other accent) will always be pronounced in exactly the same ideal manner. This is due principally to the influences of different phonetic environments on the articulation of each of the phonemes in the stream of speech concerned. This happens to phoneme sequences not only in phonetic environments within words but also in connected speech that is between phonemes at word junctures in phrases and sentences. In everyday life, speakers do not communicate by pronouncing every word individually as citations from the dictionary of that accent of the language.

Speakers connect words together in order to express intentions that they wish to communicate with their hearers: the result may be phrases or sentences. Occasionally, of course, people communicate by uttering single word utterances. But, even then, such words are not spoken as if by a 'talking dictionary', which might pronounce the word phoneme by phoneme always in exactly the same perfect way. Human beings do not speak that way in normal everyday conversation. The only context in which people might speak phoneme by phoneme are in dictating a passage, where everything must be said as clearly and as perfectly as possible.

In normal colloquial (i.e. informal or casual) conversational speech, fluency and smooth connections between one word and the next are more important than paying attention to the clarity and articulatory precision of the sound of every phoneme. Indeed, conversational speech in which full attention is given to the clarity of every phoneme may even cause boredom in the hearer or audience, and even incomprehension (although, of course, a certain minimum of accuracy in pronunciation is essential).

It is therefore obviously natural and normal that phonemes can be and are simplified to different degrees in connected speech. It is also important to know *how* they are simplified in normal, informal everyday speech in RP.

RP phonemes are usually simplified in everyday RP English speech in order to make connected speech not only smooth and fluent but also less tedious to the speaker and tiring even to the hearer’s ear. This is important for a learner of spoken English for two reasons. The first reason is that the

learner can attempt as much as possible to learn how to incorporate such simplifications into their own speech. In so applying them correctly in speech, the learner will find smooth, fluent English can be easy and enjoyable, rather than articulatory torment. The learner's speech in English will become as natural as that of a native or proficient speaker of the language. The second reason is that without knowing about such simplifications and how and why they occur in fluent normal speech of proficient or native speakers, the learner may find it difficult to understand such simplified speech addressed to him/her by such a native or proficient speaker of the language.

It should always be borne in mind that at the basis of the different ways of simplifying connected informal and/or colloquial (or informal) speech are the different possible allophones with which a given RP phoneme can be pronounced in actual speech.

What are some of the important environmental influences that necessitate the simplification of phonemes in connected speech? We shall consider four major types or groups of simplifications and the corresponding environments which make it imperative or facilitative for each to occur in connected speech, namely: assimilation, elision, liaison and l-darkening. These are all different phonological processes; most of them make use of the allophonic variants of the phonemes concerned so as to make them easy to articulate and natural sounding in different phonetic contexts. Let us begin with a careful examination of each one of these in turn, starting with assimilation.

Assimilation

Assimilation is a phonological process in which, of two phonemes that are adjacent to each other in the stream of speech, one is modified so that, in articulatory terms, it resembles the other either in place or manner of articulation. In English, and therefore in RP, it is always the preceding phoneme which is modified in order to become more like the one after it, that is, regressive assimilation. We shall use the sentences in (1) and (2) to illustrate the point.

1) there is one more sick girl

2) you can find it at the right place in the United States of
America

Transition points can be identified between groups of the words in these utterances (and sometimes between different phonemes in a word) which might prove quite difficult to say smoothly if each of the two sentences is spoken naturally. Consider the transitions between the words in (3)–(7).

2) one more

3) sick girl

4) right place

5) can find

7) United States

Two pertinent questions need to be answered at this point: What is the sequence of phonemes at each of those transition points? And what is the nature of the difficulty in saying them rapidly in that sequence? Well, the phoneme sequences are, of course /nm/, /kg/, /tp/, /nf/, /ds/.

The phonemes in the first sequence clearly share something in common: they are both nasal consonant phonemes. But they are each pronounced at a different place of articulation - alveolar vs bilabial. The phonemes in the second sequence share similarity in both place and manner of articulation; but one is voiced the other voiceless. In the third sequence, the phonemes are both voiceless stops, but differ in place of articulation. The fourth sequence reflects differences in both place and manner of articulation and even in voicing. Finally, in the fifth sequence, we have two consonant phonemes sharing the same place of articulation but different manner of articulation; furthermore, the first of the two consonants is voiced while the other is voiceless.

Obviously, the greater the number of differences between the phonemes adjacent to each other, the more difficult it will be to articulate them rapidly in fluent conversational speech. That is because the speech organs involved will have to do more complicated 'articulatory gymnastics'. The fewer the differences the greater the ease with which they can be said rapidly in succession. Therefore, in order to make all the above transitions smoother and therefore less difficult, and easier to pronounce in succession in the first instance, we need to apply the phonological process of assimilation.

The goal of the process is to make the first of the consonant phonemes in each sequence more like the second in articulatory terms. All we have to is to change the phonetic features of the first phoneme and make them resemble those of the second phoneme in the sequence. Thus, for example, /n/ differs from /m/ only in place of articulation. Therefore, if we change its place of articulation from alveolar to bilabial, the two become articulatorily identical, /mm/. So, they should be easier to pronounce rapidly in succession.

However, the result would still be somewhat odd or clumsy if the two identical phonemes are each given full articulation i.e. [wʌm mɔ], [sɪg gɜl], [raɪp pleɪs], [kæŋ faɪnd], [jənaɪtɪt steɪts]. Therefore, they need to be further simplified by reducing such clumsy sequences as [mm], [gg] and [pp] to the single long bilabial nasal, [m:], [g:] and [p:]. That means the sequences in their context would now phonetically be [wʌm:ɔ], [sɪg:ɜl][raɪp:leɪs].

We have tried to eliminate the difficult transitions by copying as many as possible of the phonetic features of the second phoneme onto the first one. If the final result is two identical segments, we simply reduce them to one long segment. This is especially appropriate for instances such as in (8) and (11).

	phonemic	phonetic
8)	/wʌn mɔ/	[ˈwʌˈm:ɔ]
9)	/sɪk gɜl/	[sɪʔˈg:ɜl]
10)	/raɪt pleɪs/	[raɪʔˈp:leɪs]

11) /kən faɪnd/ [kəm̩ˈfaɪnd]

12) /ðɪ junaɪtɪd steɪts/ [ðɪjəˈnaɪtɪtˈsteɪts]

For some of them, however, it is more natural to replace the first of the two identical consonant sounds with a glottal stop. This applies especially to alveolar stops (as in (10)) and velar stops, as in (9).

Elision

The second type of phonological process that we shall consider is elision. Elision is simply the deletion or omission of a phoneme from a sequence of consonant sounds in order to alleviate the difficulty in the transition from the first to the second. Elision, like assimilation, usually affects the first of two consonant phonemes adjacent to each other within a word or between two words. Secondly, elision most commonly deletes an alveolar stop before another consonant phoneme, especially another stop. However, other consonant sounds, especially velar stops and labiodental fricatives are, during articulation, frequently also deleted before other consonant phonemes. We present some examples in (13)–(17).

13) football /fʊtbɔl/ [ˈfʊpbɔl] [ˈfʊʔbːɔl]

14) wild life /waɪld laɪf/ [ˈwaɪl ˌlaɪf] [ˈwaɪˌlːaɪf]

15) desk top /desk tɒp/ [ˈdesˌtʰɒp]

16) ask them /ɑsk ðem/ [ˈɑs ˌðem]

17) loads of money /ləʊdz ɒv mʌnɪ/ [ˈləʊdz ə ˌmʌnɪ]

Liaison

Linking-r

Thirdly, let us now turn to the type of simplification that we have called liaison. This type is in reality a group consisting of two slightly different ways of simplifying difficult transitions in normal speech. However, they both involve the phoneme /r/. RP, it should be recalled, is a non-rhotic accent of English – where 'r' is not articulated as a consonant sound before another consonant sound or after a vowel. In liaison we have first what is referred to a linking-r and secondly intrusive-r.

Linking-r links up or connects two words smoothly in normal conversational speech when the first of those words (in its spelling) ends with the letter **r**, and the second begins with a vowel sound. Here are some typical examples. In each case, first we have indicated the presence of the letter 'r' at the end of the first word, and the vowel at the beginning of the second; then the linking-r is manifested in the phonetic transcription.

18) her brothe**r a**nd siste**r a**rrived yeste**r**day
/hə brʌðə ænd sɪstə əraɪvd jestədeɪ/
[hə 'brʌðər ən 'sɪstər ə'raɪvd 'jestədeɪ]

19) hou**r a**fte**r hour** they worked
/ɑʊə ɑftə ɑʊə ðeɪ wɜkt/
['ɑʊər ˌɑftər 'ɑʊə ðeɪ 'wɜkt]

20) here, the**r**e **a**nd everywhere there was water
/hɪə ðɛə ænd evrɪwɛə ðɛə wɒz wɔtə/
['hɪə 'ðɛər ənd 'evrɪwə ðə wəz 'wɔtə]

Likewise, any other word junctures in which – in the orthography – the first word ends in an overt '-r' and the following one begins with any vowel sound (as in, say, *better and…, far apart…, there is…, four hours…,* etc.), will similarly trigger the deployment of the linking-r strategy in native or proficient speaker speech in English.

Intrusive-r

Speakers of RP normally also pronounce an r when linking certain other words, where the second one begins with a vowel sound even though the spelling of the first one does not contain an r after the vowel letter at the end of the word. In such cases we speak of an intrusive-r. The [r] manifested in the pronunciation here is an intrusive one.

An intrusive-r therefore occurs when an RP speaker, in conversational speech, inserts an otherwise absent r in order to link one word which ends in a vowel sound to another one which begins with a vowel sound. The intrusive-r is therefore inserted with the aim of simplifying what the speaker feels would be a 'clumsy' sequence of adjacent vowels between two words. Some examples of this are provided below in (21) – (23).

21) the police preserve l**aw a**nd order here
/lɔ ænd ɔdə hɪə/
['lɔr ənd 'ɔdə hɪə]

22) bring the data out
/brɪŋ ðə deɪtə ɑʊt/
['brɪŋ ðə 'deɪtər ˌɑʊt]

23) the banana is ripe now
/ðə bənɑnə ɪz raɪp nɑʊ/
[ðə bə'nɑnər ɪz 'raɪp nɑʊ]

It should be noted, however, that it would not be true to conclude that intrusive-r may be used whenever any vowel phoneme is followed by just any other vowel phoneme. Thus, for example, the transitions between the following sequences call for the use of intrusive-r: *the idea is…, the claw of…,* etc.; but those at such junctures as *go out, they and…, eye of…,* etc., do not generally attract such form of linkage strategy.

Other Linkage Strategies

In connected English speech, words may therefore be linked smoothly to each other in a number of alternative ways: by assimilation, elision, linking-r or intrusive-r. It is, however, also quite possible to link up words in fluent informal casual or colloquial speech by using other means. Let us consider, for instance, the utterances in (24) below.

24) a. you must obey th**e or**ders.

b. that's th**e e**nd.

c. give me th**e a**nswer.

d. let's go before w**e ea**t.

In each of the examples above there are two words, the first ending with a vowel sound and the second one beginning in a vowel sound. The result is two vowel sounds adjacent to each other. They therefore call for some strategy for simplifying the awkward sequence. We cannot use any of the simplification strategies we have seen so far. But it is possible to use [ʲ] to link each pair of vowel sounds, and thus the two adjacent words as in (25).

25) a. [ju məst əʊˈbeɪ ðɪʲ ˈɔdəz]

b. [ˈðæts ðɪʲ ˈend]

c. [ˈgɪv mi ðɪʲ ˈɑnsə]

d. [ˈlets ˈres brˈfɔ wiʲ ˈit]

In each set examples in (26) below there is also a similar pair of abutting vowels. Here it is not, however, possible to use [ʲ] to link them up smoothly as was the case in the previous set. The use of [ʷ] would, however, enable us to link the two vowel sounds and therefore the two words smoothly.

26) a. it's s**o ea**sy to do this

b. she'll s**ew i**t on

c. it's time to b**ow ou**t now

d. there's n**o e**nd to it

e. let's g**o o**ver it again

Once we insert [w] between two vowel sounds and therefore the two words containing them, the vowel sounds become linked together smoothly.

27) a. [ɪts ˈsəʊʷ ˈizɪ tu ˈdu ðɪs]

b. [ʃɪl ˈsəʊʷ ɪt ˈɒn]

c. [ɪts ˈtʰaɪm tə ˈbɑʊʷ ɑʊt nɑʊ]

d. [ðəz ˌnəʊʷ ˈend tu ɪt]

e. [ˈlets ˌgəʊʷ ˈəʊvər ɪt əˈgen]

We must emphasise, however, that [ʲ] and [ʷ], when used for linking purposes as above, are each given only weak articulation. That means they are not as clearly pronounced as in yes or we, /jes/, /wi/.

There are also other means of linking words that are adjacent to each other in an utterance other than through those already discussed. For example, the transition points marked in the utterances in (28) below can be linked smoothly using appropriate or combinations of strategies.

28) a. don'**t ea**t all o**f i**t.

b. you must gi**ve hi**m **an a**nswer now.

c. gi**ve it a th**ought.

d. ca**n h**e ta**ke out any of u**s?

e. the student**s a**rrive**d a**fterwards.

We see in the above examples sequences of ordinary consonant and vowel sounds lying adjacent to one another between some of the words in the same utterance. For the majority of them, we do not need any special strategy in order to link each adjacent pair up smoothly. We only have to move smoothly from the first to the second without any pause or break, as if they were in the same word.

The result is groups like the following in (29). Notice that each group is not always made up of only single whole words. This is because a group may consist of several words uttered in an unbroken sequence; but sometimes a group may be formed by a whole word together with one or more other sound sequences from a preceding or following word, but which have been smoothly linked to it.

29) a. [ˌdəʊn'tʰi'tʰɔ:ləvɪt]

b. [jə məs 'gɪ:vɪmə'nɑns ˌnɑʊ]

c. ['gɪ:vɪtə 'θɔt]

d. [ˌkʰænɪ 'tʰeɪkɑʊ'tʰenɪˌəvəs]

e. [ðə 'stjudn̩tsə'raɪv'dɑftəwədz]

Those groups may at first look unusual or even funny when transcribed. But that is partly how 'rhythm groups' or 'feet' are formed in English speech. Each of the sound sequences separated from others by a dash constitutes one such smoothly connected rhythm unit, with a stressed syllable at its beginning: - [ˌtʰɔ:ləvəsɪt], - ['gɪ:vɪtə], - [tʰenɪˌəvəs] - ['dɑftəwədz], etc.

Clear-l and Dark-l

Finally, let us now turn our attention to the type of simplification of conversational speech that involves **l-darkening**. The darkening of /l/ is achieved through keeping the tongue in position for the articulation of the alveolar lateral while simultaneously humping the back of the tongue towards the velum. This is related to the allophonic variations of the phonemes of RP, where /l/ has [l] and [ɬ] as its two principal allophones. The five words in (30) all contain **l** in the spelling and the phoneme /l/.

30) leaf sleeve believe feel milk

/lif sliv bɪliv fil mɪlk/

Now, in their phonemic transcription each one contains /l/. However, that /l/ is not pronounced in the same way in each case. The two allophones of /l/ are deployed appropriately so that the clear allophone is used in the first three words. We therefore use the clear allophone in the first three words: [lif], [sliv], [bɪliv]. That means that the environment for the clear allophone is any one of the following: the initial position of a word, preceding a vowel sound, and in intervocalic position.

The dark allophone is deployed in the last two words: [fiɬ], [mɪɬk]. The phonetic environment for the dark allophone of /l/ is therefore either when it is in the final position of a word or when it occurs before another consonant sound. It is particularly important for learners of spoken English to bear in mind the use of this allophone. This is because they usually face serious pronunciation difficulties simply because they use the clear allophone in environments where the dark-l would make their speech smoother and easier. The result of using a clear-l where dark-l would be appropriate is the illicit insertion of some sort of a vowel sound after the erroneously chosen clear allophone of /l/ as in (31).

31) feel /fil/ *[filʊ]
or *[filɪ]

milk /mɪlk/ *[milɪk]

That is because a clear-l is difficult and phonetically unnatural to pronounce in word final position or before another consonant sound, as in (31) above. But the /l/ in those positions is much easier and sounds more natural when pronounced using its dark allophone, as in (32).

32) feel /fil/ [fiɬ]

milk /mɪlk/ [mɪɬk]

The proper choice of which allophone of /l/ to use is important not only for the /l/ occurring within a given word. The appropriate allophone is also selected when /l/ occurs between two words. This is illustrated in the following examples in (33) and (34).

33) I fee**l u**nhappy /aɪ fil ʌnhæpɪ/ [aɪ ˈfil ˌʌnˈhæpɪ]

34) I fee**l f**ine /aɪ fil faɪn/ [aɪ ˈfiɬ ˈfaɪn]

The importance of dark-l in English speech therefore goes far beyond the pronunciation of the individual word such as some of those listed in (32) above and others like *hill, well, all, install, silk, involvement, alternatives, nationals, settlements, illness, children, etc., etc.* When words like the first four in the preceding list are followed by others that begin with consonant sounds, a natural pronunciation of the transitions between them calls for the use of dark-l (e.g. *hi**ll t**op, we**ll d**one, a**ll th**at, insta**ll b**oth*).[3]

Conclusion

In order not to speak in an unnatural way, it is important for learners to be aware of and acquire the skills that proficient and native speakers deploy in

[3] When dark-l is not used at such transitions, resulting speech does only sound unnatural to the native or proficient speaker of English; there will usually also be an illicit vowel sound insertion between the clear-l used and the following consonant sound.

linking words to each other in connected English speech. Words in connected speech can be linked smoothly through assimilation - that is by one phoneme or sound influencing the one preceding it so that the latter becomes phonetically more like the former. This means that, in English, assimilation is regressive. The second method of linking words in connected speech is by elision, which involves the omission or deletion of one (usually consonant) sound when it follows another one. Elision especially affects the alveolar plosives. But it can also affect other which precede other consonant sounds.

Liaison is the third strategy of linking words in connected English speech. It is achieved through the use of the *linking-r, intrusive-r* or linking through the use of an intrusive [ʷ] or [ʲ]. Normal English speech also makes use of the distinction between clear-l and dark-l. The /l/ phoneme is darkened or *velarised* when it occurs at the end of a word or syllable, or before another consonant sound. But it is pronounced clear (that is normally or without velarisation) in all other environments: i.e. at the beginning of a word or before a vowel sound, or between vowel sounds.

While the application of linking-r in speech is straightforward since it depends on the presence of a final 'r' manifested in the spelling of the first word so as to link smoothly with a linking-r to the following vowel sound at the beginning of the second word, intrusive-r is less clear-cut. Why, for example, is it natural to use in *the idea is* but not in *go out?* It, of course, largely depends upon the nature of the vowel sound found at the end of the first word. Words that end in schwa or a phoneme that has schwa as its final component readily accepts intrusive-r (e.g. /ə ɛə ɪə ʊə əʊə ɑʊə ɔɪə eɪə aɪə/); so does the close-mid rounded vowel in *law, saw* - /ɔ/, etc. However, there is also the mere question of acceptability to the intuitions of the native or proficient speaker of English. A useful guide, generally, in the use of all the strategies is that they tend to be mutually exclusive in their use: where one is permissible the others are automatically excluded. Thus, we can use linking-r in *my brothe**r a**nd siste**r are ou**tside* but not in *y***ou a***nd J***oe are** *good friends,* while an intrusive [ʷ] is fine to use in the latter but not in the former.

It must be noted, however, that many of the strategies discussed above are obligatory and others optional in speech. That greatly depends upon

whether speech is colloquial or formal. They are obligatory in informal speech, but in formal speech some are obligatory and others optional. Nevertheless, in very formal and non-rapid speech, many of the speech simplification strategies will tend to be avoided so that every word appears to be pronounced rather carefully as in its citation form.

The elision of the alveolar plosives or their replacement with the glottal stop before another consonant sound (or their assimilation to the consonant sound they precede) is obligatory in both conversational and formal speech; and so is the velarisation of /l/ in post-vocalic or pre-consonantal positions. In modern RP speech liaison, especially, the use of linking- and intrusive-r is common in most types of speech.

Selected Bibliography

Abercrombie, D. (1964). *English Phonetic Texts.* London: Faber and Faber.

Brown, G. (1977). *Listening to Spoken English.* London: Longman.

Gimson, A. C. (1992). *An Introduction to the Pronunciation of English.* (New Edition). London: Edward Arnold.

Crystal, D. and Davy D. (19??). *Advanced Conversational English.* London: Longman.

Laver, J. (1994). *Principles of Phonetics.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Maghway, J. B. (1981). Tanzanian Speakers of English: Effects of Spelling on Vowel Pronunciation. *Language and Linguistics*, I, 1984. Dept of Foreign Languages & Linguistics, University of Dar es Salaam.

_____ (1995). "[ðe ˈpizants end ˈwekaz ov ˈefrika] or Some English Pronunciation Problems in Tanzania." *Journal of Linguistics and Language in Education, Vol. I (New Series)*, Department of Foreign Languages and Linguistics, University of Dar es Salaam.