



MODIFICATIONS OF CONSONANTS IN CONNECTED SPEECH

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ABSTRACT

This scientific article examines the phonetic processes that influence consonants in connected speech and explains how these modifications shape the natural rhythm of spoken English. When words are pronounced continuously rather than in isolation, consonant sounds change under the influence of neighboring sounds, speech rate, and articulatory requirements. The article analyzes four main types of modifications: assimilation, accommodation, elision, and linking. Each process is described in terms of its articulatory mechanism and communicative function. The study also highlights the significance of teaching connected speech phenomena to improve learners' listening comprehension and pronunciation. By reviewing linguistic research, the article concludes that understanding consonant modifications is essential for achieving fluent and natural spoken English.

In natural spoken language, sounds are not produced separately but form a continuous stream. As a result, they influence each other in various ways. Connected speech reflects real communication, where speed and fluency are more important than careful articulation. Consonants, in particular, undergo several phonetic modifications that simplify speech production and ensure smooth transitions between words. Scholars such as Daniel Jones, Gimson, Roach, and Cruttenden emphasize that these modifications are central to the description of English phonetics. Understanding these changes helps learners interpret authentic speech and produce natural pronunciation. This article examines the main types of consonant modifications in connected speech and explains their linguistic and pedagogical importance.

Connected speech has been widely studied because it reveals how language functions in natural communication. Roach (2000) describes connected speech processes as the natural result of continuous articulation. Cruttenden (2014) notes that these changes are systematic

and predictable. Kenworthy (1987) and Celce-Murcia et al. (2010) argue that teaching connected speech improves learners' fluency and comprehension. Cauldwell (2013) highlights that learners often struggle with reduced speech forms in listening because classroom English differs greatly from spontaneous speech. Overall, research shows that consonant modifications are essential for understanding the real sound patterns of English.

Assimilation

Assimilation is a phonetic process in which one sound becomes more similar to a neighboring sound in order to facilitate easier and more economical articulation. It is one of the most common types of sound modification in English connected speech and plays a significant role in natural, fluent pronunciation. Assimilation occurs because speech sounds are not produced in isolation; instead, they influence one another within the speech stream due to the close interaction of articulatory organs.

Assimilation can be classified according to the direction of influence. In progressive assimilation, a preceding sound influences a following sound. For example, in the plural ending -s, the final sound of the noun determines the pronunciation: books /bʊks/ (voiceless) versus bags /bægz/ (voiced). In regressive assimilation, the following sound affects the preceding one, which is particularly common in English. For instance, ten boys is often pronounced /tem bɔɪz/, where the alveolar /n/ changes to bilabial /m/ under the influence of the following bilabial /b/. Coalescent assimilation occurs when two adjacent sounds influence each other and merge into a new sound, as in don't you → /dəʊntʃu/ or would you → /wʊdʒu/.

Another important classification of assimilation is based on the aspect of articulation affected. Assimilation by place of articulation involves a change in the articulatory position of a sound to match that of a neighboring sound. For example, ten boys → /tem bɔɪz/ shows the change of /n/ to /m/ due to the bilabial /b/. Assimilation by manner of articulation involves a change in how the sound is produced. In good night → /gʊn naɪt/, the plosive /d/ is replaced by the nasal /n/ to conform to the following nasal sound. Assimilation by voicing occurs when a sound changes its voicing to match a neighboring sound, as in of course → /əv kɔ:s/, where the normally voiced /v/ becomes voiceless /f/ before the voiceless /k/.

Assimilation may also be complete or partial. In complete assimilation, one sound fully changes into another, resulting in identical sounds, as in handbag → /'hæmbæg/. In partial assimilation, the sound retains some of its original features while adopting others, which is more common in everyday speech. Most cases of assimilation in English are regressive and partial. Assimilation contributes significantly to the rhythm, fluency, and naturalness of spoken English. Although it may not be reflected in spelling, it is an essential feature of connected speech and an important area of study in English phonetics and phonology, particularly for learners aiming to achieve native-like pronunciation.

Accommodation

Accommodation, also referred to as coarticulation, is a phonetic process that involves the mutual influence between adjacent vowels and consonants in connected speech. Unlike assimilation, which primarily affects consonants, accommodation reflects the interaction between different classes of sounds and arises from the continuous and overlapping nature of

speech production. During articulation, the speech organs begin to prepare for the pronunciation of an upcoming sound before the current sound is fully completed, resulting in slight but systematic modifications.

One common type of accommodation occurs when consonants are influenced by following or preceding vowels. For instance, consonants tend to become palatalized before or after front vowels such as /i:/ and /e/. In words like *tea* /ti:/ and *deal* /di:l/, the tongue moves forward in anticipation of the front vowel, giving the consonants /t/ and /d/ a palatalized quality. This type of accommodation is especially noticeable in careful phonetic analysis, even though it is not reflected in spelling.

Conversely, consonants may become velarized or labialized in the environment of back vowels such as /u:/ and /ɔ:/. In words like *cool* /ku:l/ and *go* /gəʊ/, the tongue is retracted and the lips are rounded in preparation for the back vowel, influencing the articulation of the preceding consonants. These adjustments contribute to the natural flow of speech and help reduce articulatory effort.

Accommodation can also be observed in the influence of consonants on vowels. For example, vowels may be slightly shortened before voiceless consonants, as in *beat* versus *bead*, or may change their quality depending on the surrounding consonants. Such effects illustrate the bidirectional nature of accommodation, where both vowels and consonants adapt to each other. Accommodation plays a crucial role in ensuring smooth transitions between sounds in continuous speech. It enhances fluency, rhythm, and naturalness, making spoken language more efficient and easier to produce. As a fundamental feature of connected speech, accommodation is an important area of study in English phonetics and phonology, particularly for learners seeking accurate and natural pronunciation.

Elision

Elision is a phonetic process that involves the omission of a sound, usually a consonant, in rapid, fluent, or informal speech. It occurs as a result of the tendency toward ease and economy of articulation, allowing speakers to produce speech more smoothly and efficiently. Elision is a characteristic feature of connected speech in English and is especially common in everyday conversation, though it is rarely reflected in the written form of the language.

One of the most frequent types of elision in English is the omission of alveolar plosives /t/ and /d/ in consonant clusters, particularly when these sounds occur between other consonants. For example, in phrases such as *next week* /nekst wi:k/ and *friendship* /'fren(d)ʃɪp/, the sounds /t/ and /d/ are often dropped in natural speech to simplify articulation. This type of elision typically occurs when the omitted sound does not carry essential meaning and its absence does not affect comprehension.

Another common type of elision involves the omission of the consonant /h/ in weak forms of function words, especially pronouns and auxiliary verbs. For instance, *tell him* is frequently pronounced as /tel ɪm/ rather than /tel hɪm/. Similarly, in phrases such as *give her* or *ask him*, the initial /h/ is often elided. This phenomenon reflects the reduced stress and weaker pronunciation of grammatical words in connected speech.

Elision may also affect vowels, particularly in unstressed syllables. For example, in rapid speech, the vowel in words like *family* may be omitted, resulting in /'fæmli/ instead of /'fæmɪli/. Such vowel elision further contributes to the rhythmic and economical nature of spoken

English. Elision makes spoken forms noticeably shorter and less explicit than their written counterparts, which can pose difficulties for learners of English. Understanding elision is therefore essential for developing effective listening skills and achieving more natural pronunciation. As a key component of connected speech, elision illustrates the dynamic and adaptive nature of spoken language.

Linking and Intrusion

Linking and intrusion are important phonetic processes in English connected speech that ensure smooth and continuous transitions between words in natural spoken discourse. These processes contribute significantly to the fluency, rhythm, and intelligibility of speech, especially in rapid or informal communication.

Linking refers to the close phonetic connection between the final sound of one word and the initial sound of the following word. When a word ends in a consonant and the next word begins with a vowel, the final consonant is linked directly to the vowel sound, forming a continuous articulatory movement. For example, in phrases such as *pick it up* /pɪk ɪt ʌp/ and *turn off* /tɜ:n ɒf/, the final consonants /k/ and /n/ are smoothly joined to the following vowel sounds. This type of linking prevents pauses or breaks between words and makes speech sound more natural and fluent.

A particularly important type of linking in English is linking /r/. In non-rhotic accents such as Received Pronunciation, the sound /r/ is not pronounced at the end of a word unless it is followed by a vowel. For instance, *far away* is pronounced /fɑ:r əweɪ/, where the /r/ appears to link the two words. This phenomenon illustrates how linking operates across word boundaries to maintain phonetic continuity.

Intrusion, by contrast, occurs when an additional sound is inserted between two vowel sounds that belong to different words in order to ease pronunciation and avoid a hiatus. The most common intrusive sounds in English are /j/, /w/, and /r/. For example, in *I agree*, speakers often insert /j/, resulting in /aɪ əgri:/, while *go away* may be pronounced as /gəʊw əweɪ/ with an intrusive /w/. Similarly, *idea of* is frequently pronounced /aɪ'diə əv/, where an intrusive /r/ links the two vowels smoothly.

Although intrusion is sometimes considered non-standard from a prescriptive point of view, it is a natural and widespread feature of spontaneous speech and plays an important role in maintaining the rhythm and flow of spoken English. Both linking and intrusion reflect the tendency of English speakers to avoid abrupt vowel-to-vowel transitions and to favor continuous, economical articulation. Linking and intrusion are essential components of connected speech that help preserve fluency, rhythm, and naturalness. A clear understanding of these processes is particularly important for learners of English, as they explain why spoken forms often differ from written forms and why natural speech may initially be difficult to perceive and reproduce.

CONCLUSION

Consonant modifications in connected speech play a crucial role in shaping the natural rhythm, fluency, and intelligibility of English. Processes such as assimilation, accommodation, elision, linking, and intrusion occur regularly in rapid and spontaneous speech, allowing speakers to articulate words more easily and efficiently while maintaining continuity across syllables and

word boundaries. These phenomena are not merely phonetic curiosities; they reflect the dynamic, adaptive nature of spoken English, showing how sounds interact and influence each other in real communication.

A thorough understanding of these processes is essential for learners of English, as it enhances both listening comprehension and spoken production. Learners who are familiar with connected speech patterns are better able to recognize naturally pronounced words in fast speech, avoid misinterpretation, and reproduce speech in a more native-like manner. Moreover, teaching these phenomena bridges the gap between formal classroom English and authentic, everyday communication, helping students move beyond textbook forms toward fluency in real-life contexts.

In addition, awareness of consonant modifications contributes to more precise and expressive communication. By mastering the patterns of assimilation, accommodation, elision, and linking, speakers can convey subtle nuances, maintain rhythm, and achieve a smoother, more natural speech style. Therefore, the study of connected speech is not only of theoretical importance in phonetics and linguistics but also of practical significance for effective language learning, teaching, and communication in English.

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