

Some Aspects of Connected Speech

Introduction

The foregoing units looked in some depth at the phonological properties of syllables. In other words, we have not heretofore addressed the all-too crucial issue of the properties of speech sounds, of syllables and indeed of entire words in the most typical of language levels: connected speech. It goes without saying that we set about segmenting language into its smallest units because it is our hope that by so doing it is more readily understandable. We know deep down that those accounts we lay down on the individual properties of distinct speech sounds and even of larger sound chunks, such as syllables, is a bit of an abstract, idealized portrayal of what truly goes on in the phonic medium. The phonic medium is far removed from the traits depicted by segmental phonologists predominantly because those individual properties reported by phonologists are hardly fully present when sounds are blended together in that fascinatingly baffling way humans so instinctively use.

The following will take you along a number of properties, doubtless tangible and far more representative, of English connected speech. Connected speech simply designates language units above the level of words. In other words, connected speech can stand for phrases of varying form and length, clauses of different grammatical make-up and sentences, be they simple, complex or compound-complex sentences, to mention but a few instances. We will in what follows talk about three main aspects of connected speech, namely, elision, assimilation and linking.

Elision

It refers to the deletion or removal of a segment, whether it be a vowel, a consonant or a syllable in its entirety. (Roach 2002) Elision manifests itself at the phrasal, clausal or sentential level. We do not typically see elision operating at the level of individual words. Because, after all, like any other features of connected speech, elision can be legitimately viewed as a facilitative device speakers deploy for the sake of easing up articulatory strain whenever they feel that this will not interfere with the comprehensibility of their messages. This, nonetheless, does not connote that it is entirely up to the individual speakers to go for the patterns that suits them as there are socially acceptable speaking conventions they have to bow to. That is why foreigners are strongly advised to abide only by the patterns of elision described in books if they want to elide at all. Using patterns that are against native norms would render their accents foreign-sounding if not un-intelligible altogether.

A fallacy that some foreigners hold locally is that elision is a feature of sloppy speech. They claim that elision is used solely by native speakers in very informal contexts. Do not be under any elusion, this is far from the truth. Even the most highly educated of native speakers at the most prestigious universities use it. Mind you, they do not overuse it. Now we will look at each of the three types of elision in turn.

Elision of Vowels

The vowel that often undergoes elision is, hardly surprisingly, the schwa vowel. At the beginning of a number of frequently used words, the schwa is often dropped, such as tonight, police, today, perhaps.

Elision of Consonants

Consonant number one that undergoes elision is /f/ or /v/ in the word of. The /t/ and /d/ and even /k/ and /T/ often undergo elision when they appear in the middle of a three consonant cluster. In all the following words, the middle consonant in the coda generally has zero realization: linked, asked, acts, months.

Elision of Entire Syllables

As mentioned above, even syllables are prone to be elided. A word of caution should be sounded here: only weak syllables undergo elision. The penultimate syllable 'ra' in a number of English words is often removed, as in, particularly, probably, February, library, temporary.

Linking

Another feature of connected speech worth making it into the Algerian learners' linguistic conscious is linking. It simply means the transitions we make when passing from one word into another one. We do not pronounce a string of words as if we are merely listing them. This, accordingly, requires that we make very smooth transitions when going from one word into the ensuing one in a given chunk.

Our utterances are marked by pre-pauses and post-pauses. In between the two pauses, the words are glued together to form a highly harmonic whole. This fluid holding together of words makes us feel as if the speaker is not stepping from one word onto another. Verily, if rule-governed linking is fully complied with, listeners would feel that the speaker is uttering a

very giant multi-syllabic word. Now we come to the kernel of this issue: how is it that speakers go about linking words together? What are the processes invoked?

There are in fact myriad processes at work for rendering speech into the unified, pauses-uncluttered entity it typically is.

When two words come in a succession, the first of which is a vowel sound and the second starts in yet another vowel sounds, it is considered over-careful and stilted if a pause is made between the two words, unless you have no air left in your lungs to carry on. One other possibility is the usage of the glottal stop between the two vowels. Though it is used and deemed equally correct by some native speakers, the overwhelming bulk of them frown upon this usage. To link two words of this type together the following tips will be useful:

Look at the nature of the vocalic element at the end of the first word;

Look at the vocalic nature of the element at the beginning of the second word;

If the first and the second elements are the long /I:/ or short /I/, then produce a prolonged one without making any interruption. Here are examples:

You got to furnish many examples;

He is a talented writer.

If the second element is a back vowel, then after the production of the first word put your lips ready for the production of a very brief light /w/ sound before you get into the production of the second word. This process might sound cumbersome and counter-productive (you might think you will end up stuttering and stammering to get this pronunciation right). Indeed, you might experience some oddity at first, but cling onto it. You will come to make it more easily and in a native-like fashion if you try it over a number of times. You will feel self-conscious at first, but after coming in terms with it, it will flow as naturally as the routine production of other stretches of sounds. Here are illustrative examples:

The law in this country is quite chaotic.

Another way of linking words together is the sounding of the post-vocalic /r/. The /r/ sound in all rhotic accents has zero realizations in pre-consonantal, pre-pausal and post-vocalic positions. The only position where it is pronounced is pre-vocalic environments. In connected speech, then, the pronunciation of /r/ in the last environments is a linking device, pronunciation-wise. Below are examples:

Her father-in-law is quite indignant at the way she was treated;

The mayor promised to look more seriously into public transport later on.

The Intrusive /r/

Another way for achieving cohesion as it were in pronunciation is through the usage of the intrusive /r/. The intrusive /r/, as is so called, is a /r/ sound that is present in phonic form of the English language without it being present in its graphic form. (Chalker and Weiner 1994) For instance, in the utterance, 'I saw a film yesterday.' Some native speaker insert a /r/ sound between 'saw' and 'a'.

This usage of the /r/, though highly frequent in the speech of a great many schooled native speakers, some of them deem it inappropriate. It seems that even those who disapprove of it when hearing others use it, actually use themselves in their own colloquial speech. Although I am in no way saying that Algerian learners ought to use, I am fairly sure that knowing of the existence of such a pronunciation would be a true boon for them when listening to native speakers.

The intrusive /r/ is generally used to link words the first of which ends in a vowel (mainly /@/, /3/, /A; and /O;/) and the second starts in a vowel. Here are examples:

The charity's idea is fabulous;

The toddler saw a nice peacock in the picture-book;

This milieu is quite perilous for teens;

My grandma is eighty.

It could, likewise, be used within the boundary of one word. The same rule applies, though. The word drawing is a very good case in point.
