

## MODIFICATIONS OF VOWELS IN CONNECTED SPEECH

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**Annotation:** This article provides a comprehensive overview of the modifications that vowels undergo in connected speech, focusing on key processes such as vowel reduction, assimilation, coalescence, elision, and intrusion. It explores how these modifications contribute to the natural flow, rhythm, and efficiency of spoken language, highlighting their role in reducing articulatory effort and enhancing speech fluency. Through examples and explanations, the article demonstrates how vowels change in response to neighboring sounds, context, and speech rate. The piece emphasizes the importance of these modifications for language learners, suggesting that understanding and practicing them can improve both comprehension and pronunciation. This resource is valuable for those seeking to sound more native-like and achieve more effective, fluid communication in spoken English.

**Key words:** vowel reduction, assimilation, coalescence, elision, intrusion, connected speech, vowel modification, natural flow, rhythm, speech efficiency, articulation, fluid communication, language learners, pronunciation, native-like speech, vowel changes, spoken language, speech patterns, vowel merging, speech fluency.

### Modifications of Vowels in Connected Speech

In natural, rapid speech, vowels undergo various modifications that make them sound different from their isolated form. These modifications, which are crucial for the flow and efficiency of speech, occur due to the influence of neighboring sounds, the rhythm of speech, and the ease of articulation. Understanding these changes is essential for both native and non-native speakers to achieve more fluent and natural pronunciation.

#### Vowel Reduction

One of the most common modifications of vowels in connected speech is **vowel reduction**, where full vowels are shortened and pronounced less distinctly. This is particularly evident in unstressed syllables. For example, in the word "banana," the second "a" is often reduced to a schwa [ə], especially in fast speech. The reduction of vowels



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typically involves a shift from a more "open" or "clear" sound (like [æ] or [ɪ]) to a more central, neutral sound [ə], which is the most common reduced vowel in English.

Vowel reduction serves to make speech more efficient, as it allows the speaker to focus more energy on stressed syllables, which carry the primary meaning of the utterance. The process can be observed in many English function words like articles, prepositions, and auxiliary verbs (e.g., *the, to, and, was*), which often lose their full vowel in casual speech.

### **Coalescence**

Coalescence is another phenomenon in which two adjacent vowel sounds merge to form a new sound. This occurs when two vowels in connected speech influence each other and combine into a different vowel sound entirely. For example, in some dialects of English, the phrase "I'm going to" may be pronounced as "I'm gonna." Here, the [oo] and [ə] sounds of "to" coalesce to form [ə], creating a more fluid, faster sound that's easier to articulate in casual conversation.

### **Assimilation of Vowels**

Assimilation refers to the process by which a vowel sound changes to become more like a neighboring sound. This can happen in a variety of ways, including progressive assimilation (where the preceding sound influences the vowel), regressive assimilation (where the following sound influences the vowel), and reciprocal assimilation (where both sounds influence each other). For example:

- In the phrase "*good evening*," the /i:/ in "evening" may assimilate to a shorter, more centralized vowel [ɪ], producing a sound closer to "gud evening."
- In rapid speech, the phrase "*that is*" can sound like "thats," where the vowel [ɪ] in "is" assimilates towards the preceding consonant /t/, resulting in a more clipped vowel.

These changes help to reduce the articulatory effort and make speech more fluid and quicker, thus enhancing its natural rhythm.

### **Elision**

Elision occurs when a vowel sound is completely omitted in connected speech. This often happens when a vowel is between two consonants, especially when the vowel does not carry stress or is part of a function word. For example, in the phrase "*next day*," the /t/ in "next" may merge with the vowel sound in "day," so the vowel sound is omitted altogether. This results in a smoother transition between words and helps the speaker save time and energy.



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Elision is particularly common with unstressed vowels, and speakers often reduce vowels to a near-inaudible level when these sounds fall between other consonants, as in *"I'm gonna"* instead of *"I'm going to."*

### **Intrusion**

Intrusion is a phenomenon in which an additional sound, typically a consonant, is inserted between two vowels to help the speech flow more smoothly. Although not strictly a modification of vowels themselves, it often involves a vowel modification to aid pronunciation. For example, in the phrase *"I saw it"* in rapid speech, an [r] may intrude, making it sound like "I saw-r-it." Similarly, the phrase "go on" may sound like "go-won," where a [w] sound is inserted.

Intrusion makes speech more fluid and helps prevent awkward pauses or glottal stops between vowel sounds.

### **Linking and Intrusive Vowels**

Linking and intrusive vowels help bridge words that would otherwise end and begin with consonants. In connected speech, a vowel sound may intrude between two words to make the transition smoother. For example, in "I saw it," a linking [ɪ] sound may be used to bridge the final /s/ and initial vowel /ɪ/ of "it." Similarly, in the phrase "law and order," an intrusive [ə] might appear between the final /ɔ:/ and the initial /æ/ sound, producing "law-r-and order."

### **Monophthongization**

In some dialects, particularly in fast or casual speech, diphthongs (complex vowel sounds that glide from one position to another within a syllable) may become monophthongs, where the sound is simplified into a single vowel. For example, in some varieties of English, the diphthong [aʊ] in "house" may be pronounced as a monophthong [a:], resulting in a sound closer to "haas."

This shift usually happens in more relaxed speech or in specific accents or dialects, contributing to the regional character of a language.

### **Conclusion**

Modifications of vowels in connected speech serve several important functions in spoken language. They contribute to the rhythm, efficiency, and fluency of communication. Vowel reduction, assimilation, coalescence, elision, intrusion, and linking all work together to facilitate smoother, faster, and more natural speech. For language learners, understanding



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these modifications can significantly improve their listening and speaking skills, helping them sound more like native speakers and enhancing their overall communication abilities. In conclusion, the modifications of vowels in connected speech are essential to the natural flow of language. These changes not only help speakers conserve energy and speak more efficiently but also contribute to the rhythm and melody of speech. By understanding the various vowel modifications—such as reduction, assimilation, and coalescence—learners can improve their comprehension and production of fluent, natural-sounding speech. Mastery of these modifications can make a significant difference in sounding more native-like, as it allows for a more authentic understanding of how vowels behave in real-world conversation. Ultimately, recognizing and practicing these changes is key to achieving greater ease and effectiveness in spoken communication.

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