



MAIN FEATURES OF REDUCTION OF VOWELS IN ENGLISH

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Abstract

This article discusses specific peculiarities of vowel reduction in English pronunciation. Different types of vowel reduction will be analyzed in this paper. Besides that, certain ways of teaching the pronunciation of words with reduced vowels will be suggested in this research.

Key words: English pronunciation, phoneme, vowel, consonant, stress, unstressed syllable, unstressed vocalism, shortening, weakening, disappearance, neutral position, drill exercises

Introduction

The unstressed vocalism of English includes all vowel phonemes and the neutral phoneme /ə/ which appears as a result of weakening of the vowels in the unstressed position. The vowel /ə/ articulated by weak articulatory affect, has an indefinite timbre and changes its quality under the influence of neighbouring sounds depending on its position, and in certain positions it may be omitted. Therefore, it may have different variations distinct from each other, especially, by the height of the tongue and duration. The X-ray picture of /ə/ in **a cat** /ə`kæt/ shows that this vowel may be classified as mixed, mid-broad variation, unrounded (either lips are spread or neutral) vowel. Usually linguists distinguish from two to four variations of /ə/. [1]

The neutral vowel, which appears in final unstressed position, is somewhat close to the timbre of the vowel /ʌ/, perhaps, to the Russian /a/ and the Uzbek /a/, but is shorter than they are: **worker** /wə:kə/ **matter** /mætə/ etc. The next version of /ə/ is used in initial and median unstressed positions except the neighbouring /k/ and /g/. This type of /ə/ is pronounced by a higher position of the tongue than in the first version: **announce** /ə`nauns/, **about** /ə`baut/. These two versions of /ə/ are regarded basic in practical studying of English. The version of /ə/ used by the neighbouring /k/ and /g/ is regarded to be a very short and back, close-narrow variation: continue /kən`tInju:/, **aggregate** /ə`grIgeIt/. The fourth version occurs before the consonants /z/ and /d/ which are used as morphemes expressing the plural form of nouns and the tense of verbs: **matters** /mætəz/, **hunters** /hʌntəz/, **covered** /kʌvəd/. It resembles /ɜ:/ though it is pronounced half-long. All these versions have different degrees of laxity. They are notated by the symbols /ə¹, ə³, ə^u, ə/. [2]

They all represent the reduced forms of the neutral vowel /ə/, as they all occur in unstressed positions under the influence of reduction. Weakening of the unstressed syllables, as a result of which vowels (sometimes, consonants) change their quality and quantity features, is called reduction. The shortening of the vowel-length in unstressed position is known as a quantity reduction, while the omission of the



clear tamber of a vowel is termed as a quality reduction. The most widespread type of quality reduction is neutralization, used in the phonetic but not phonological sense. The vowels of the neutral tamber have features similar to vowels with a certain quality called “cardinal tambers” by A.L.Trakhterov.[3] Speaking about /ə/ it is better to describe it as “neutral tamber”, than “neutral position” of speech organs. Usually “neutral position” is used to describe the configuration of the speech organs just prior to a certain articulation of a speech sound. In a neutral position the velum is raised and the air-flow through the nose is shut off. Such a universal neutral position does not exist in the articulation of any speech sound. However, some linguists consider that the sounds /æ/, /ɜ:/, /ʌ/, /e/, /ə/ may be produced by a neutral position.

It should be stated that the neutral vowel /ə/ may often be omitted in colloquial rapid style of speech, but never so in the unstressed /ɪ/: cotton /`kɒt(ə)n/, London /`lʌnd(ə)n/, darkness /`dɑ:kni:s/, sausage /`sɔ:sɪdʒ/ etc. According to their occurrence some authors distinguish vowels of: 1) full formation; 2) semi-weak vowels, i.e. those which take an intermediate position between strong vowels and the neutral /ə/ and 3) weak vowels. The idea of the semi-weak vowels have been made clear by G.P. Torsuyev and V.A. Vassilyev: “From the distributional point of view a semi-weak vowel... be defined as a partially reduced vowel which is used in more careful style of pronunciation instead of the neutral vowel used in the rapid colloquial style and instead of the corresponding vowel of full formation used in the full style”. All the unstressed vowels of constantly full formation are used in all styles of pronunciation and even in many words of foreign origin, especially Latin and Greek, which have not yet been fully adopted in English: insect /`ɪnsekt/, epochs /`i:pɒks/, diagram /`daɪəgræm/, marquee /`mɑ:ki:/ etc.[4]

Results and discussion

Reduction is a historical process of weakening, shortening or disappearance of vowel sounds in unstressed positions. This phonetic phenomenon, as well as assimilation, is closely connected with the general development of the language system. Reduction reflects the process of lexical and grammatical changes.

Reduction may be of the following types [5]:

1) qualitative, which is divided into reduction Type A and Type B.

Type A (when the vowels *i*, *e*, *y* are in an unstressed position). Subjecting to this type of reduction these vowels are pronounced [ɪ]: *di'vide* [dɪ'vaɪd]

Type B (when the vowels *a*, *o*, *u* are in an unstressed position). Subjecting to this type of reduction these vowels are pronounced [ə]: *po'lite* [pə'laɪt]

2) quantitative. It is shortening of the length of a long vowel sound: *me* [miː] 3) complete. It is the disappearance of a vowel sound. It occurs when an unstressed vowel occupies the position after the stressed one and it is between a noiseless sound and a sonorant one, where the sonorant forms a syllable. '*cotton* [`kɒtn] Besides the mentioned above types of reduction, there are special cases of reduction which include all the vowels. They are:



- a. The vowel **a** if it precedes the combinations “-ate”, “-ade” is subjected to the reduction Type A in adjectives and nouns and is not reduced in verbs. *'regulate* ['regjuleɪt] *'climate* ['klaɪmɪt]
- b. The vowel **e** is subjected to the reduction Type B before “-nt”, “-nce”, “-n”, “-m”.
'silence ['saɪləns] *'student* ['stju:dənt] *'solemn* ['sɒləm]
- c. the vowel **o** in the first type of syllable is not reduced at the end of the word:
po'tato [pə'teɪtəʊ] *'photo* ['fəʊtəʊ]
- d. The vowel **i** when preceding the combination “-ble” is subjected to reduction Type B:
ɪ'nac'cesible [ɪ'mæk'səsəbl], but *'possible* ['pɒsɪbl]
- e. The vowel **u** in the first type of syllable at the beginning and at the end of the word is not reduced and in the middle of the word is subjected to the quantitative reduction.
'institute ['ɪnstɪtju:t] *u'nite* [ju:'naɪt]
ˌedu'cation [ˌedʒu'keɪʃn] **Note:** [ˌedʒu'keɪʃn]
- f. The vowels are subjected only to the reduction Type B in the third and fourth types of syllables or are not reduced at all.
'summer ['sʌmə] *fore' see* [fɔ:'si:] *'writer* ['raɪtə]
- g. The diagraphs **ei**, **ey**, **ai**, **ay**, **ee**, **ea** are subjected to reduction Type A.
'mountain ['maʊntɪn] *'always* ['ɔ:lweɪz]
'forehead ['fɔ:rɪd], **but** *'vengeance* ['vendʒəns]
- h. The diagraph **ou** is subjected to the reduction Type B
er' roneous [ɪ'raʊniəs] *'various* ['væriəs]
- i. the diagraph **ow** is not reduced and is pronounced [ou] in an unstressed position.
'window ['wɪndəʊ]
- j. the diagraph **oa** is not reduced either.
'cocoa ['kəʊkəʊ]

In English there are certain words, which have two forms of pronunciation:

- a) Strong or full form and b) Weak or reduced form, the words such as form-words and the following pronouns: personal, possessive, reflexive and the indefinite pronoun “some” denoting indefinite quantity.

There are a number ways of teaching the English reduction in practical English lessons, one of which is drill exercises where a teacher uses different English polysyllabic words and asks the learners to repeat after the teacher of script recorded with the pronunciation of words uttered by a native English speaker. This type of exercise should repeatedly be used in class several times in every lesson. This may cause to overcome interference in improving correct pronunciation as practice makes perfect. Not only separated words, but also certain sentences or dialogues can be an effective way for improving pronunciation of language learners. Dialogues can be performed by the learners as role play or any other practical activity. Besides that, it is advisable using modern pedagogical technologies like overhead projector, computers, video material and tape recorders in order to develop pronunciation skills of language learners. The use of audio-lingual and audiovisual methods with authentic material can be



very useful source in improving the learners' pronunciation at intermediate or upper-intermediate levels.

Conclusion

Using drill exercises with native English speaker's voice can be one of the most effective ways of improving English pronunciation, namely to follow all rules of the pronunciation of polysyllabic words with unstressed vowel or vowels. Besides that, audio-lingual and audiovisual methods with authentic material can be a good support for correct pronunciation of the English words. Moreover, the use of modern pedagogical technologies in practical English lessons while teaching phonetic changes of phonemes plays an essential role in teaching foreign languages.

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