English vowel deletion and insertion – an OT perspective

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In this paper, the focus is on vowel epenthesis and vowel deletion in English.The first phenomenon can be observed, among other things, in loan phonology. In order to accommodate foreign word-initial clusters that do not obey the well-formedness conditions on English syllable structure, native speakers may either break up the cluster through the deletion of the initial consonant or, alternatively, through vowel epenthesis as in, for instance, *Gdansk* [gədænsk] ~ [dænsk] or they may preserve the cluster pronouncing *Gdansk* as [gdænsk].

With respect to vowel elision, a distinction is generally made between pre-stress vowel dropping (e.g *parade* – ['preid]) and post-stress vowel deletion (e.g in *memory* – ['memri]). A further distinction that needs to be made (cf. Hooper (1978) depends on whether or not the elision of the vowel is complete, given that in many cases two alternative pronunciations are possible: one in which, after vowel dropping the initial sequences in *police* and *please*, for instance, become completely homophonous and one in which they do not (that is in which /l/ in *police* is not devoiced as it is in *please*). Here the devoicing of /l/ (and the lack of it) may serve to differentiate the two cases. Within an OT framework, Kager (1997) refers to these two possibilities as categorial versus gradient vowel deletion.

Our goal in this paper is twofold. The first one is more descriptive: providing an OT-analysis of the above cases of English vowel epenthesis and deletion. The second is more theory-internal. Kager's (1997) distinction between gradient and complete deletion appears, contrary to fact, to predict that the latter is not possible in words like *potato* or *together,* but only instances such as *police* or *parade*. This is so because complete deletion destroys the syllabicity of the vowel and creates ill-formed onsets predicted to be governed by phonotactic considerations. Given that [pl] and [pr] are permissible onset clusters, but [tg] is not, schwa deletion in *together* cannot be categorial. Furthermore, the co-existence of vowel elision, by which *Canadian* [kəneidiən] is realized as ['kneidiən], and vowel insertion, by which /kn/ in *Knesset* is broken up by an epenthetic vowel, leads, from an OT-perspective, to opacity. We will discuss this issue and the various ways OT offers to account for it.