

Vowel Quality in Unstressed Syllables

MARIA SCHUBIGER

Universities of Zurich and Basel

IT IS CHARACTERISTIC of present-day spoken English that in unstressed syllables vowels and some diphthongs are often reduced to a neutral sound of little sonority, mostly ə, often ɪ, occasionally u. Spelling gives no hint as to whether the reduction takes place or not. We say prefect 'prɪ:fekt but perfect 'pɜ:fɪkt, Lapland 'læplænd but Finland 'fɪnlənd, August 'ɔ:gəst but august ɔ:'gʌst, formality fɔ:'mæltɪ but forgetfulness fə'getfʌnlɪs and so on. It seems a perfect maze. On closer observation, however, we discover various motive forces which either favour vowel reduction or tend to check it. It is the purpose of this article to give an account of these forces, so that the student of English may more easily thread his way through the maze.

I. Unstressed Syllables of Polysyllabic Words

1. *Rhythm* plays a prominent part. There is a tendency in English to reduce syllables adjacent to the stressed one, and to place a subsidiary stress on those at one remove from it. The semi-stressed syllable preserves its vowel quality.¹ This occurs almost regularly before the main stress, e.g.

magazine ,mægə'zɪ:n, politician pə'llɪtʃn, artisan ,ɑ:tɪ'zæn
transformation ,trænsfə'meɪʃn, economic ,ɪ:kə'nɒmɪk

Compare: remain rɪ'meɪn with recognition ,rekəg'nɪʃn
prosaic prə'zeɪɪk with provocation ,prɒvə'keɪʃn
defend dɪ'fend with degradation ,degrə'deɪʃn

Note. This alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables, of strong and weak vowels, is sometimes overridden by the tendency to preserve in a derivative the stress and vowel of the word it is derived from, in other words by *analogy*.

We say examination ɪg,zæmɪ'neɪʃn (to examine ɪg'zæmɪn)
appendicitis ə,pendɪ'saɪtɪs (appendix ə'pendɪks)
pronunciation prə,nʌnsɪ'eɪʃn (to pronounce prə'naʊns)
but canalization ,kænəlaɪ'zeɪʃn (to canalize 'kænəlaɪz)
harmonization ,hɑ:mənaɪ'zeɪʃn (to harmonize
'hɑ:mənaɪz)
characteristic ,kærəktə'rɪstɪk (character 'kærəktə)

¹All we can say for certain is that the two phenomena are interdependent. A subsidiary stress favours the preservation of the full vowel; a full vowel produces the impression of a subsidiary stress.

Likewise, the frequent preservation of a strong vowel in the syllable immediately preceding that carrying the main stress is in many cases supported by analogy, e.g.

virginity *və* : 'dʒɪnɪtɪ (virgin 'və : dʒɪn)
 fertility *fə* : 'tɪlɪtɪ (fertile 'fə : tɪl)
 formality *fɔ* : 'mæltɪ (formal 'fɔ : məl)
 mortality *mɔ* : 'tælɪtɪ (mortal 'mɔ : tɪl)
 normality *nɔ* : 'mæltɪ (normal 'nɔ : məl)
 morbidity *mɔ* : 'bɪdɪtɪ (morbid 'mɔ : bɪd)

A subsidiary stress can also fall on a syllable at one remove *after* the main stress, e.g.

intellect 'ɪntə,lekt, dialect 'daɪə,lekt, catalogue 'kætə,lɒg,
 dialogue 'daɪə,lɒg, episode 'epɪ,səʊd, cataract 'kætə,rækt,
 gramophone 'græmə,fəʊn, telegram 'telɪ,græm,
 caravan 'kærə,væn, atmosphere 'ætməs,fɪlə,
 escalator 'eskə,leɪtə, refrigerator rɪ'frɪdʒə,reɪtə.

But very often two or three completely unstressed syllables, with weak vowels, follow upon the main stress,¹ e.g.

hurricane 'hʌrɪkən, calendar 'kæləndə, vegetable 'vedʒətəbl,
 comfortable 'kʌmfətəbəl, melancholy 'meləŋkəli,
 particular pə'tɪkjələ, graduate 'grædʒuɪt,
 experiment ɪk'sperɪmənt.²

2. *Frequency* and therefore *familiarity* of a word favours reduction; while unfamiliarity often checks it, even in a syllable adjacent to the full stress. Compounds are good instances in point:

We must say England, Holland, Finland, Shetland, Switzerland, Northumberland, highland, lowland (-lənd).

But we can say Lapland, Thailand, Greenland (-lənd), and we must say Heligoland, Disneyland, wonderland, fairyland (-lənd).

We say milkman, postman, chairman (of a meeting), footman (-mən); but snowman, chairman (in a park) (-mən); gentleman (-mən); but handyman (-mən).

We must say strawberry, blackberry, bilberry, raspberry (-bəri); but we can say dewberry (-beri).

Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, holiday, Saturday can be pronounced -deɪ or -di; Doomsday, Boxing-day only -deɪ.

Weakening of vowel quality is on the increase today, e.g.

despot 'despɒt, 'despət; product 'prɒdʌkt, 'prɒdəkt;

¹The end of a word resists detrition much less than the beginning. This is a phenomenon observable in many languages and at many stages of their evolution.

²Verbs in -ment and -ate carry a secondary stress on the suffix, which retains its full vowel; e.g. to experiment ɪks'perɪmənt, to separate 'sepə,reɪt. Some nouns can be stressed and pronounced like the corresponding verbs: estimate 'estɪ,meɪt or 'estɪmɪt, associate ə'souʃl,eɪt or ə'souʃɪt.

suburb 'sʌbə:b, 'sʌbəb; record 'rekɔ:d, 'rekəd;

garage 'gærɑ:ʒ, 'gærɪdʒ.

Many words resist this trend, especially those in ou and (j)u:; e.g.

window 'wɪndəu, shadow 'ʃædəu, narrow 'nærəu,

piano 'pjænəu, tomato tə'mɑ:təu, nephew 'nevju:, argue 'ɑ:gju:,

value 'vælju:, tissue 'tɪsju:.¹

3. *Meaning*, namely the fading of the meaning of the component elements of a compound word, is responsible for many sound reductions, some of long standing.

Compare saucepan 'sɔ:spən with ashpan 'æʃpæn, stewpan 'stju:pæn, and with sauceboat 'sɔ:sbəʊt

cupboard 'kʌbəd with blackboard 'blækbɔ:d and with

cupbowl 'kʌpbəʊl

forehead 'fɔ:ɪd with spearhead 'spi:ləhed and with

forelock 'fɔ:lɒk

shepherd 'ʃepəd with goatherd 'gəʊθə:d and with

sheepskin 'ʃi:pskɪn

walnut 'wɔ:lənət(-nət) with peanut 'pi:nət and with

wall fruit 'wɔ:lfru:t

chestnut 'tʃesnət(-nət) with peanut 'pi:nət and with

chest-note 'tʃestnəʊt.

Note. There is a reaction today against the ever-increasing reduction of sounds and the resulting discrepancy between spelling and pronunciation. It is called spelling pronunciation.

Here are a few examples:

waistcoat 'weɪskəʊt is newer than 'weskət.

landscape 'lændskeɪp is practically the only form today;

'lænskɪp is old-fashioned.

comrade 'kɒmreɪd is newer than 'kɒmɪd, 'kɑmɪd.

venison 'venɪzn is newer than 'venzn.

Which weak sound—ə, ɪ, u or zero—is appropriate in a given word?

The least sonorous vowel is ə. All the open or semi-open vowels (æ, ɑ:, ɔ, ɔ:, ʌ, ə:) are reduced to ə; e.g.

accept ək'sept, herself hə'self, steadfast 'stedfəst,

to contest kən'test, Augustine ə'gɑstɪn, to subject səb'dʒekt.

With a few exceptions, also e can be reduced to ə, but here there is the alternative ɪ. Side by side with ə, ɪ appears chiefly in prefixes and suffixes; e.g.

become bɪ'kɑm bə-, defend dɪ'fend də-, prefer prɪ'fə: prə-,

return rɪ'tə:n rə-, actress 'æktrɪs -əs, friendless 'frendlɪs -ləs,

fondness 'fɒndnɪs -nəs, pocket 'pɒkɪt -ət, quickest 'kwɪkɪst -əst,

linen 'lɪnɪn -ən.

¹'wɪndə, 'nevɪ are sub-standard pronunciations.

There is the same alternative with the suffixes -ace, -ate, -ain; e.g. palace 'pæls -əs, private 'praɪvɪt -ət, captain 'kæptɪn -ən. The suffix -age, however, is always pronounced -ɪdʒ; e.g. package 'pækɪdʒ, damage 'dæmɪdʒ, village 'vɪlɪdʒ.

In all these prefixes and suffixes ə is gaining ground.¹ With the grammatical endings -es and -ed reduction to ə is not received pronunciation (RP) and should be avoided. It blurs the difference between many pairs of words, such as offices 'ɒfɪsɪz, officers 'ɒfɪsəz, raises 'reɪzɪz, razors 'reɪzəz, counted 'kauntɪd, countered 'kauntəd. For the same reason ə is avoided with effect 'ɪfekt, except ɪk'sept, precede prɪ'sɪ:d. This distinguishes them from affect ə'fekt, accept ək'sept, proceed prə'sɪ:d.

The sound l is normally not reduced to ə; e.g. Latin 'lætɪn, habit 'hæbɪt, animal 'ænməl.²

The diphthong aɪ is either preserved or reduced to ɪ. In the initial syllable di- it is mostly reduced; e.g. to digest dɪ'dʒest, direct dɪ'rekt, dilemma dɪ'lemə, divan dɪ'væn. It is preferably preserved in minute (adj.) maɪ'nju:t, idyllic aɪ'dɪlɪk, finance faɪ'næns, identity aɪ'dentɪti, tribunal traɪ'bju:nəl. It is always preserved in ideal aɪ'diəl, gigantic dʒaɪ'gæntɪk, finality faɪ'nælɪti, criterion kraɪ'tɪəriəl, priority praɪ'ɔrɪti, migration maɪ'grɛɪʃn, triangular traɪ'æŋɡjʊlə, and in most words in -ile: agile 'ædʒaɪl, hostile 'hɒstaɪl, textile 'tekstaɪl, senile 'si:nal.³ It is also preserved in many words in -ite: contrite 'kɒntraɪt, appetite 'æpətəɪt, parasite 'pærəsəɪt, dynamite 'daɪnəmaɪt.

The diphthong ou is either preserved or reduced to ə, occasionally to u; e.g. diplomatic dɪplə'mætɪk, irrevocable ɪ'revəkəbl.

Elision of the unstressed vowel is very frequent in quick speech; e.g. history 'hɪstri, terrifically tə'rɪfɪkli,⁴ university juɪ'nɪvə:stɪ, Catholic 'kæθlɪk, prisoner 'prɪznə, properly 'prɒplɪ, I expect aɪ'kspekt. Some elisions are still considered very colloquial, e.g. cigarette sɪɡ'ret, possible 'pɒsbl.

Sometimes a possible confusion of two meanings prevents the elision. Compare business, sometimes spelt busyness 'bɪznəs (state of being busy), with business 'bɪznəs (enterprise)

practically 'præktɪkəl (in a practical way) with

practically 'præktɪkəl (nearly, so to speak)

awfully 'ɔ:flɪ (terribly) with awfully 'ɔ:flɪ (very).

¹Some British speakers react unfavourably to this ə even today. Some time ago a reviewer of a radio play based on *Pride and Prejudice* wrote: 'I wish they didn't call her Miss Bennet'.

²Americans tend to say 'lætən, 'hæbət, etc.

³Americans say 'ædʒɪl, 'hɒstɪl, etc.

⁴Spelt also *terrificly*.

Elision does not always reduce the number of syllables. The adjacent consonant—mostly l or n—may become syllabic. This, too, is very frequent; e.g. happen 'hæpən, version 'və:ʃən, useful 'ju:sfəl, ordinary 'ɔ:dənəl, marshal mə:ʃəl, cardinal 'kɑ:dənəl.¹ The same phenomenon can be observed in short sentences; e.g. Get along 'get|ɔŋ, never mind 'nev'maɪnd.

Between two nasals, however, elision is inadmissible in RP; e.g. woman 'wʊmən, German 'dʒə:mən; also between stop+nasal and nasal; e.g. London 'lʌndən, Anthony 'æntəni.

On the other hand elision is compulsory with -ten, -den, -ton, -don, -tan, -dan following upon a vowel; e.g. kitten 'kɪtən, Eden 'i:dən, Newton 'nju:tən, Gordon 'gɔ:dən, Satan 'seɪtən, Wodan 'wʊdən. It is optional if a consonant precedes, e.g. golden 'gəʊld(ə)n, Boston 'bɒst(ə)n. It is also optional with -tern, -dern, -tain; e.g. pattern 'pæt(ə)n, modern 'mɒd(ə)n, curtain 'kɜ:t(ə)n, captain 'kæpt(ə)n.

As a result of elision consonant clusters like pl, kr emerge. They are not, however, at least not in the early stage after the elision took place, quite identical with the same clusters of long standing. Contrary to pl, cr in words like please pʌl:z, cry krai,² where l and r are devoiced under the influence of the preceding voiceless consonant, these new clusters have a voiced second consonant; e.g. police pʌl:z, career kriə. The ə has disappeared, but in disappearing has left its mark upon the following consonant. Here are some phrases and sentences for comparison:

Please call the police 'pʌl:z 'kɔ:l ðə 'pʌl:z

Two ships collided on the Clyde 'tu: 'ʃɪps 'klaɪdɪd ɔn ðə 'kʌɪld

A cranky career ə 'kræŋki 'kriə.

The last stage, elision without leaving a trace, was reached long ago with words like history 'hɪstɪl, pram (perambulator) pɾəm, perhaps pɾæps. It has been reached by some speakers of RP with solicitor 'sɒlɪstə, police station 'pʌl:z steɪʃn, though less frequently with police pʌl:z.

Note. By this process *new consonant clusters* have emerged, or are on the point of emerging, which have for a long time been absent from the phonemic set-up of English:

Initial kn- It disappeared in the 15-17th centuries in words like 'to know, knife'. It is reappearing in words like 'to connect'.

R+consonant It disappeared in the 16-17th centuries in words like 'learnt'. It is reappearing in words like 'parent, apparent'.

¹ŋ, | stand for syllabic n, l.

²l, r stand for devoiced l, r.

- Initial pn-* The p is not sounded in pneumonia, pneumatic. But pn- is pronounced by some speakers in Penelope, peninsula.
- Initial mn* The m is not sounded in mnemonic, but mn- is pronounced by some speakers in menagerie, minority.

II. Grammatical Form Words

Grammatical form-words can be reduced in a way similar to that in the weak syllables of content words:

Strong form	have hæv	and ænd	of ɔv	but bat
Reduction of vowel	həv	ænd	əv	bət
Elision of the vowel		nd	v	
Elision of a consonant	əv, v ¹	n	ə	
Strong form	were wə:	be bi:	him him ³	
Reduction of vowel	wə	bi ³		
Elision of the vowel				
Elision of a consonant			im	

Whether we use a reduced form, and which reduced form, depends on various factors, some purely phonetical, some functional.

1. Contrary to the content word, where a difference of speed is rarely responsible for two competing pronunciations, *rapidity of utterance* is of great importance here, e.g.

Slow: you and I 'ju:ənd 'al

Quick: 'ju: ən 'al

Slow: a pint of milk ə 'paɪnt əv 'mɪlk
ə 'paɪnt ə 'mɪlk⁴

Slow: Look at that balloon 'lʊk ət ðæt bæ'lu:n

Quick: 'lʊk ə ðæt bæ'lu:n⁵

Slow: Yes, sir 'jes sə:

Quick: 'jes sə⁶

Note. In very slow, deliberate utterance, such as public speaking, or in the exposition of an intricate theme, form-words often retain

¹h vanishes most easily when there is an h at the beginning of an adjacent content word, which cannot be dropped; e.g. I saw his house aɪ 'sɔ: ɪz 'haʊs, Hunt has hurt his head 'hʌnt əz 'hɜ:t ɪz 'hed.

²Be, been, she, we, me, he sometimes reduce i: to ɪ in unstressed position; you, who can reduce u: to u.

³Him, his, it, its, if, in, with always preserve the vowel i.

⁴Poster: Drinka Pinta Milka Day.

⁵Caption: Looka that bloody Balloon.

⁶Str is an enclitic, i.e. a short unstressed word appended to a stressed one here and therefore treated like a form-word.

their strong vowel. Even the articles are sometimes said without vowel reduction, especially the definite article; e.g.

'We are impressed by the (ðl:) consistency of this young boy,
by the (ðl:) singlemindedness with which . . .'
'Ladies and Gentlemen, It is a (eɪ) very great pleasure . . .'

2. The pronunciation of a form-word can also depend upon *the following sound*; e.g.

Saint Andrew snt 'ændru:, Saint Thomas sŋ 'tɔməs¹
Bill and Alice 'bɪl ənd 'æɪlɪs, Bill and Tom 'bɪl ən 'tɔm²
At one o'clock ət 'wʌn ə'klɒk, at ten o'clock ə 'ten ə'klɒk
She has ʃɪ(:) 'hæz, She is ʃɪ: 'ɪz,³ to go tə ɡəʊ, to eat tu ɪ: t
She got rid of us ʃɪ ɡɒt 'rɪd əv əs,
She got rid of them ʃɪ ɡɒt 'rɪd ə ðəm.⁴

3. *Function* can play a certain part. Some form-words have several grammatical functions, not all equally weighty, and are treated accordingly.

(a) The demonstrative pronoun *that* has no weak form. Even when it is unstressed, it is pronounced ðæt; e.g.

That's your fault ðæts 'juə fɔ:lt, That's difficult ðæts 'dɪfɪkəlt.

Note. *This, these, those* are not shortened either, except occasionally *this* in phrases like *this morning, this evening*.

The conjunction and the relative pronoun *that* are pronounced ðæt; e.g.

I know that you are free aɪ 'nou ðæt ju ə 'fri:
It's the best that I can do for you ɪts ðə 'best ðæt aɪ kən 'du: fə ju:.

(b) *Have* (had, has) is reduced considerably when it functions as an auxiliary; e.g. I've seen him aɪv 'si:n hɪm, He's done it hi:z 'dʌn ɪt. It is not reduced when it is a full verb in the meaning of 'to possess', or when it stands for another verb; e.g. We have a Vauxhall wɪ hæv ə 'vɔks'hɔ:l, We have lunch at one o'clock wɪ hæv 'lʌntʃ ət 'wʌn ə'klɒk.

It is not reduced either when it means 'to cause something to be done'; e.g. Last autumn we had our kitchen whitewashed . . . wɪ həd əwə 'kɪtʃən 'waɪtwɔʃt.

(c) *Some* sŋ is a partitive word corresponding to French *du*,

¹Saint, being here a proclitic, behaves like a form-word.

²Today ən, ŋ are almost general, whether there follows a vowel or a consonant. With *saint* the t is not dropped before a vowel.

³to be at home tə bi(:) ət haʊm, to be in bed tə bi: ɪn bed.

⁴*Of* is most frequently reduced to ə before the similar fricative consonant ð.

de la, des, German etwas, einige; e.g. Get me some bread and some apples get mi sm 'bred n sm 'æplz.

Some sam is an indefinite word, corresponding to French quelque, German irgend ein, etwelche; e.g. There must be some secret ðə 'mɑst bi sam 'st:krit. I heard with some surprise that . . . al 'hə:d wið sam sə'praiz . . .

(d) *Us*, the object case of the pronoun *we* is pronounced əs; e.g. He met us in the hall hi: 'met əs in ðə 'hɔ:l. He let us off lightly hi: 'let əs 'ɔf 'laɪtli.

It is shortened to s in the phrase Let's . . ., where its grammatical function has faded; e.g. Let's go to the pictures 'lets 'gou tə ðə 'pɪktʃəz.

The following form-words are hardly ever weakened:

on ɔn on Monday ɔn 'mʌndi, It depends on me it di'pendz ɔn 'mi:,
On my desk ɔn mal 'desk, Cf. And my desk ən mal 'desk.

or ɔ: One lump or two 'wʌn 'lʌmp ɔ: 'tu: ? Black or white
'blæk ɔ: 'waɪt?

The pronunciation is ə in phrases like two or three
'tu: ə 'θri:, for a minute or two fər ə 'mɪnɪt ə 'tu:,
more or less 'mɔ:r ə 'les.

their is always ðɛə before a consonant; e.g. their mother ðɛə 'mʌðə, their books ðɛə 'bʊks. It is occasionally ðə before a vowel, for here it cannot be mistaken for the definite article; e.g. their uncles ðər 'ʌŋklz.

The indefinite pronoun *there* is pronounced ðə. As it always precedes a verb, it cannot be mistaken for the article.

your is nearly always pronounced jɔ:; e.g. Your book jɔ: 'bʊk. In familiar speech it is occasionally reduced to jə; e.g. What's your name 'wɔts jə 'neɪm?

not is either reduced to non-syllabic -n't and attached to an auxiliary (don't, can't, etc.) or it preserves its full vowel; e.g. You mustn't (must not) disturb me ju 'mʌsnt (mʌst nɔt) di'stə:b mi:. Only *cannot* is occasionally reduced to 'kænət.

my, by are rarely reduced to mi, bi. We say my lord mi 'lɔ:d, my lady mi 'leɪdi. Otherwise mi and bi are only used occasionally in familiar or jocular style; e.g. Come along my child 'kʌm ə'lɔŋ mi 'tʃaɪld, Never in my life 'nevər ɪn mi 'laɪf, You must do it by yourself ju məs 'du: ɪt bi juə'self.

Note. Final prepositions, though unstressed, retain the strong vowel; e.g. What are you laughing at 'wɔt ə ju 'lɑ:fɪŋ æt?

Where have you come from 'wɛə həv ju 'kʌm frɒm?

Likewise, a preposition followed by an unstressed personal pronoun very often preserves its strong vowel; e.g. Fortune disposed otherwise of me 'fɔ:tʃn dɪs'pouzɪd 'ʌðəwaɪz əv mi: I had great respect for it əl hæd 'greɪt rɪ'spekt fɔ:r ɪt.¹

FOR THE YOUNG TEACHER—1

The Incidental Presentation of Teaching Items (1)

A. S. HORNBY

IT IS GENERALLY agreed today that important teaching items should first be presented orally. An oral presentation of the new item by the teacher is followed by oral drills for the class.

It sometimes happens, however, that a new item receives little or no attention during subsequent weeks, or even months. The textbook goes on to deal with other items. Unless the new item is regularly used and practised, pupils are likely to forget it.

There are some teaching items which are unsuitable for drills. They may, however, be suitable for incidental use. A teacher who has a good command of English, and who sees and uses such opportunities, can do much to help his pupils.

This article suggests ways in which items which have been insufficiently drilled, and items which are unsuitable for drills, may be dealt with incidentally.

The interrogative-negative is an example. The teacher may use it incidentally, whenever opportunities occur. He will be using it as it is normally used, in real situations. He will make it clear that an affirmative answer is *expected*, even though, in some cases, the answer may be negative. Here are some possibilities.

(1) A pupil appears not to know something which he may reasonably be expected to know. The teacher looks at him and asks, with a rise in pitch on the appropriate word:

Don't you know what *lend* means?

Don't you know how to spell *friend* yet?

¹The strong vowel in these unstressed prepositions faintly mirrors the pronunciation of the *stressed* group: preposition + pronoun, where the full stress falls on the preposition, e.g. Chinking glasses: Here's to you hɪəz 'tu: ju. When they are with me . . . 'wen ðel ə 'wið mi: . . .