

Syncope dilemma in Spoken English: Phonology or Phonetics?

Background

This poster investigates the status of a subset of vowel zero alternations in contemporary spoken English also known as syncope, compression or schwa deletion, be it post-tonic (famØly) or pre-tonic (phØnetic). While the rhythmic constraints triggering syncope are well understood, the phonotactic conditions blocking suppression have been debated since early work in Generative Phonology (Zwicky 1972, Hooper 1978). The status of the phenomenon remains somewhat unclear up to this day and its treatment oscillates between an unpredictable performance matter vs. a regular post-lexical process, phonetic vs. phonological, fast speech process vs. lexical regularity. This indeterminacy is reflected datawise as well ranging from the rather restrictive view of pronunciation dictionaries such as LPD to corpus studies (Dalby 1986, Davidson (2006)).

Method

This study has a twofold objective. First we propose new data on the status of syncope in spoken English on the basis of 3 corpora containing spontaneous conversations and reading tasks of 30 speakers (Santa Barbara, Lancashire & Ayrshire), completed with fast speech data for the reading. This step was necessary since corpus studies are often based on phonetic assumptions and we wanted more phonological control over the data to gain a deeper understanding of the phonology of syncope. Second, we discuss the phonological implications of our results.

Results

Our data show that roughly half of the syncope sites fall outside the official grammar of English: following obstruents, following and preceding CC clusters do not seem to inhibit syncope. Phonotactic parsability of secondary clusters does not seem to be a *sine qua non* condition on vowel deletion. The difference between fast vs. slow speech syncope patterns is only quantitative: the separation of syncope sites into allowed / phonological / core vs. disallowed / phonetic / peripheral seems to be irrelevant. Pre-tonic syncope shows marked regional differences though, speakers from California syncope the most followed by Lancashire and Ayrshire.

Phonological interpretation

In the light of our data, the distinction between grammatical vs. performance patterns should be irrelevant and syncope should look like an across the board process. Nevertheless, we claim that the distinction between well behaved surfaceneutralising syncope and phonetic non neutralising syncope makes part of native speaker's knowledge. On closer inspection of the data the missing vowel is often recoverable from opaque surface strings through different kind of indices such as:

a, sØ[p ^h]osed	unexpected aspiration
b, ca[r]Ølog	unexpected tapping
c, po[z]Øtive	unexpected voicing
d, pro[bØb]ly	surface gemination

Our claim is that ungrammatical strings do contribute to interpretation and they need not necessarily be repaired or make the derivation crash. Every time a speaker comes across such strings they will interpret surface ungrammaticality as non-adjacency and reconstruct missing vowels. The case is similar to opaque strings resulting from compounding and lexical insertion at the utterance level. Our claims call for experimentalevidence which will be the topic of future extensions. The project will involve testing speakers with logatoms. The prediction is that every time a speaker encounters lexically unparsable strings they will interpret them either as resulting from syncope or some kind of a word boundary.

References

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