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## ASSIMILATION AND ELISION IN ENGLISH AND SLOVENE

### SUMMARY

*Assimilation and elision, two important features of connected speech, are compared in English (RP) and in (standard and non-standard) Slovene. Non-standard pronunciation (the dialect of Ljubljana) has been included for Slovene in order to establish a parallel between the casual style of informal RP and the casual style of Slovene non-standard pronunciation, which varies from dialect to dialect. While there are no important differences between the standard and non-standard Slovene pronunciations with regard to (voice and place) assimilation, inclusion of non-standard (informal) pronunciation seems essential for the purpose of contrasting the process of (vowel and consonant) elision in the two languages.*

*The present contrastive study has shown certain parallels between the two languages in the investigated area, as well as a number of differences; the latter can to a large extent be attributed to the existing differences in the sound systems of English and Slovene. Most notably, convergence can be observed in regressive place-of-articulation assimilation (e.g. assimilation of alveolar consonants) and elision of consonants (in consonantal clusters), while the main differences occur in voice assimilation of obstruents and elision/weakening of vowels.*

*The main aim of the study is to point out the necessity of a contrastive approach both in view of understanding certain general tendencies, characteristic of connected speech across different languages, as well as in view of enabling non-native students' comprehension and acquisition of the processes of elision and assimilation in English by establishing links with their mother tongue.*

**Key words:** *assimilation (phonetics), elision, English language, Slovene language*

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## ASSIMILATION AND ELISION IN ENGLISH AND SLOVENE

In teaching English phonetics at tertiary level, assimilation and elision are necessarily dealt with in considerable detail because of their importance from the practical point of view of both comprehension and acquisition of every-day 'colloquial' speech, as well as from the theoretical viewpoint in terms of explaining phonemic and allophonic variations occurring on the syllable- and word-boundary. On the basis of descriptions of the two features in the selected literature devoted to English and Slovene phonetics and phonology, one might be led to conclude that they (in particular elision) are considerably more common in English than in Slovene. It seems, however, that the apparent difference between the two languages in this respect results from the fact that phonetic descriptions of Slovene generally focus on the 'standard' language, used in formal rather than informal communication. Furthermore, the traditional approach to phonetic features of Slovene has been prescriptive rather than descriptive, which - together with the prevailing preoccupation with 'careful' standard pronunciation, explains the neglect of those features that occur in non-standard (informal) interaction among Slovene speakers. In English, on the other hand, a clear distinction is made (within the boundaries of the Standard English dialect and the standard British English pronunciation, often referred to as RP - Received Pronunciation) between 'careful/slow' and 'casual, informal, colloquial, rapid' speech.

In order to find parallels to the differences between 'careful' and 'casual' pronunciation observed for English, we therefore need to pass the boundaries of 'standard' Slovene and compare the 'prescribed' features of formal oral communication with those of informal colloquial Slovene. Considering that, in my view, the 'colloquial standard Slovene' ('pogovorni knjižni jezik': see Toporišič, 1984:12), is only a vague compromise between 'standard' and 'non-standard' (necessarily dialectal) pronunciation, one therefore has to search for features of connected speech in a dialectal variety used in every-day interaction between Slovene speakers in different regions. Since I am most familiar with the speech of native speakers of Slovene educated and living in Ljubljana, my examples of 'colloquial Slovene' will refer to features of connected speech occurring in this particular (although not necessarily uniform) dialect.

In order to illustrate the difference between the standard and the selected non-standard pronunciation, we can compare the following realisations of an (invented) sentence:

*Standard:*

*Mi moramo nare'diti, kar smo oblju'bili in vsakomur vr'niti, kar je njegovega.*

*Non-standard (Ljubljana):*

*Mi mormo na'rest, kar smo u'blubl pa vsakmu 'vərənt, kar je negouga.*

In the present analysis of assimilation, mostly phonemic (and only marginally allophonic) voice and place-of-articulation assimilation will be contrasted for the two languages in question. In comparing elision in English and Slovene, both elision of consonants (prevailing in consonant clusters) and elision of vowels (in unaccented syllables) are dealt with, with some examples provided for the elision of whole syllables in the two languages.

## 1. PHONEMIC ASSIMILATION OF CONSONANTS IN ENGLISH

### 1.1 Place-of-Articulation Assimilation

In English, this mostly concerns the assimilation of alveolar consonants (plosives and nasal) to the following bilabials and velars, e.g. in: *that* /t→p/ *pen*, *good* /d→b/ *boy*, *downbeat* /n→m/; *that* /t→k/ *car*, *good* /d→g/ *girl*, *incredible* /n→ŋ/. The alveolar fricatives assimilate to the following palatal and palato-alveolar consonants (/j, ʃ, ʒ, tʃ, dʒ/), e.g.:

/s→ʃ/: *this chair*, *this shoe*, *this year*;

/z→ʒ/: *these chairs*, *these shoes*, *these years*

In addition, all alveolars may coalesce with the following /j/ to form palato-alveolar affricates and fricatives, e.g.:

*but you* /tj→tʃ/, *would you* /dj→dʒ/, *this year* /sj→ʃ/, *these years* /zj→ʒ/

An interesting case of place assimilation is that of the lenis dental fricative /ð/, which can assimilate to a following alveolar fricative /s, z/, e.g.:

*I loathe singing* /ð→z/ (Gimson and Cruttenden, 1994: 260)

The example shows that certain consonant clusters which are problematic for foreign speakers of English (and obviously also for native speakers) can be simplified by means of assimilation.

### 1.2 Voice Assimilation

According to Gimson and Cruttenden (1994: 258), regressive voice assimilation of obstruents is common in certain Northern English accents, but rare in RP, where it occurs only in certain 'close-knit' groups, e.g. in: *of course*, *we've found* /v→f/, *with thanks* /ð→θ/, *was sent* /z→s/.

Brown, however (1977: 69), provides some surprising examples of progressive voice assimilation on the word boundary, e.g.: *Bank of England* /-kʃ-/ , *that's the news* /-sθ-/.

More commonly, of course, progressive assimilation in English is allophonic, and concerns devoicing of sonorants following fortis obstruents, as in: *place*, *cure*, *trap*, etc.

## 2. ELISION IN ENGLISH

### 2.1 Elision of Consonants

In RP, the alveolar plosives /t/ and /d/ are often elided when they are between consonants, either within a word (see for example Gimson and Cruttenden, 1994: 215), or on the word boundary (see for example Brown, 1977: 62): *mostly, handsome, first three, must be, World Wide Life Fund, Ireland troubles.*

Brown (1997) also gives examples of elision of /d/ between a vowel and a consonant, e.g.:

*who'd been, suspended from, rapidly, loudspeaker, there could be*

In addition, Gimson and Cruttenden (1994: 215) mention potential elision of /l/ following /ɔ:/ and preceding a consonant, e.g. in *always, already, although, all right*, and elision of /p/ between /m/ and /s/ (e.g. in *glimpse*), while Brown (1977: 66) gives examples of the (rare) elision of /k/, e.g. in *asked, expected, etc.*, and of /v/ and /ð/ followed by a consonant, in particular in the case of weak forms of grammatical words such as *have, of* and *the*, e.g. (Brown, 1977: 63):

*five PM: we've been considering, needs of the working people, from the hospital, I think that was.*

Brown (1977: 66) also observes the partial (thus allophonic) elision of /n/, which leaves its trace by means of nasalisation of the preceding vowel, e.g. in: *between the two, constantly*. It should be added that this partial elision of /n/ is very common when the nasal is followed by a bilabial fricative (/f/ or /v/); rather than treated as 'partial elision', this realisation of /n/ is usually referred to as an instance of allophonic place assimilation, with alveolar nasal changing to labiodental (/n/ → [m]), e.g.: *environment, inferior, in view of, in fact*.

### 2.2 Elision of Vowels

The vowels most often elided in unaccented syllables in English are the 'weak' /ə/ and /ɪ/, when they occur in certain environments, either in syllables preceding or syllables following the primary accent. For the first case, Gimson and Cruttenden (1994: 214) mention the elision of the schwa between consonants, where the preceding consonant is either an obstruent or a sonorant, and the following one is a sonorant (/r/, /l/ or /n/), e.g. in: *different, comparable, territory, camera;*

*bachelor, specialist, novelist; lightning, thickening*

In syllables preceding the primary accent, /ə/ and /ɪ/ are again most commonly elided between a consonant (in this case an obstruent) on the left and a sonorant (most often /r/ or /l/) on the right, but also between a fricative and a plosive or nasal, e.g. (Gimson and Cruttenden, 1994: 214):

*police, parade, collision, correct, ferocious, philology; photography, phonetics, supporter, satirical*

Brown (1977: 68) also gives examples of elision of initial vowels, which are interesting from our contrastive point of view: *it's the way /tʃə/*

### 2.3 Elision of Whole Syllables

Gimson and Cruttenden (1994: 215) find examples of this in words with primary accent followed by two unaccented syllables, both of which begin with /r/, e.g.: *library* /'laɪbrɪ/, *literary* /'lɪtrɪ/.

## 3. PHONEMIC ASSIMILATION OF CONSONANTS IN SLOVENE

### 3.1 Place-of-Articulation Assimilation

No particular differences can be observed in this case if we compare assimilation in standard and non-standard pronunciation, except that - as one would expect - assimilation (along with accompanying elision of both vowels and consonants) occurs more frequently in non-standard (colloquial) speech. We can compare, for example, the 'careful' standard and the 'casual' non-standard pronunciations of every-day words such as numerals (*sedemdeset* vs. *sens* /'sensət/) and word groups (e.g. *samo kdaj* vs. *sam kdaj* /sarj gdai/).

Concerning the assimilation of /t, d, n/, which are dental rather than alveolar in Slovene, only the nasal /n/ assimilates to the following bilabials and velars, but not the plosives /t/ and /d/. For example: *ven* (/n/ →[ŋ]) *grem*, *ven* (/n/ →[m]), *bom šel*. Considering that /ŋ/ is not a phoneme in Slovene, velar assimilation is allophonic. The bilabial nasal /m/ behaves in the same way as /n/, assimilating just as readily to the consonant following it, e.g. in: *ne vem*, *zakaj*; *ne vem*, *kdaj*.

Although I have found no reference to this in sources describing assimilation in English, one would expect either assimilation or 'partial elision' (referred to above for /n/) to occur regularly in both languages. Compare the examples above with their English counterparts, e.g.: *some stupid girls*; *ask them to stay*.

Just as in English, the alveolar fricatives /s, z/ assimilate also in Slovene to the following palato-alveolar consonants (/ʃ, ʒ, tʃ, dʒ/), but not to the palatal semi-vowel /j/. Although this assimilation has been accepted also for standard pronunciation, it is more common in fast colloquial than in careful / formal communication. The following examples can be found in Toporišič (1984: 85): *sčasoma* /s→ʃ/, *iz* /z→s→ʃ/ *sole*, *iz* /z→ʒ/ *žepa*

### 3.2 Voice Assimilation

Again, no particular differences can be observed between the standard and the non-standard pronunciation of the selected dialect. Voice assimilation in Slovene follows a general rule, according to which a cluster of obstruents always consists either of two voiced or two voiceless consonants. In other words, a voiced obstruent cannot be preceded by a voiceless one (e.g. *risba* /zb/) and vice versa. (e.g. *odkar* /tk/). According to Toporišič, however (1984: 81), in some Slovene dialects in the NE of Styria, voiceless obstruents become voiced not only before the following voiced obstruents, but also before all sonorants, e.g. (my examples):

ogled mesta /dm/, odraz vaše politike /zv/; lep večer /bv/, vas vabimo /zv/,  
včerajšnjih novic [ɣn].

It seems that this type of assimilation is penetrating into the standard pronunciation; one can hear it increasingly often on Slovene radio and TV channels.

#### 4. ELISION IN STANDARD AND COLLOQUIAL SLOVENE (IN THE DIALECT OF LJUBLJANA)

I have found no reference to either weakening or elision of vowels in Standard Slovene. As for the elision of consonants, Toporišič (1984: 84) mentions the possibility of elision of one of the two identical in casual speech, if 'such pronunciation does not lead to ambiguity', and gives the following examples: *oddati, brezzob, brez skrbi, on noče, sam misli*.

At this point, the most important differences between standard and non-standard pronunciation become immediately apparent, and so does the reason why (in order to find parallels in the two languages) the standard English pronunciation should be compared with non-standard Slovene pronunciation.

##### 4.1 Elision of Consonants

In the dialect of Ljubljana, the consonant that is most often elided is the semi-vowel /j/, when it occurs in consonantal clusters /lj/, /nj/ (alternatively leading to metathesis /jn/), /tj/, /kj/, /ʃj/, /zj/ and /zj/. For example: *življenje - živlejne, prepričljiv - prepričliv, volja - vola, njemu - nemu, tretja - treta, kje - ke, višji - viši, nižji - niži, zjutraj - zutri*.

This can be contrasted with the elision of /j/ (optionally) in RP (and even more notably in General American), where it occurs between certain consonants and the vowel /u:/, e.g. in: *illusion, numerous, suitcase, resume*.

With the exception of the labio-dental approximant /v/ (pronounced as one of the allophonic realisations [v u w ʍ]), also all other Slovene sonorants can be elided in some frequently used words, e.g.: /r/ *ker - kə*; /l/ *koliko - kok, kolikor - 'kokə*

Among the obstruents, we can find examples of elision of the plosives /k, g/ and /t, d/ (but not of /p, b/), the affricate /tʃ/ (but not /dʒ/, which is rare in Slovene anyway) and of two fricatives, namely /ʃ/ in /x/ (there are no examples of elision of /f/, /s/ and /z/). As in the case of English /t/ and /d/, elision generally occurs in clusters of two or three consonants. Examples:

/k/ *kakšen - 'kašən, kəšən, lahko - loh; /g/ glej - lej*

/t/ *čisto nor - čis nor, tistega - 'tizga, kot - kə, katera - 'kera, dostikrat - 'doskrat, potlej - pol*

/d/ *sedemdeset - 'sensət*

/tʃ/ *zanalašč - zana'ləš, na tešče - na tə'se; /ʃ/ rajši - raj; /x/ včasih - včas*

#### 4.2 Elision of Vowels

In the dialect of Ljubljana, apart from elision of vowels, we find cases of weakening and monophthongisation. While the weakening of strong vowels to the weak /ə/ and /ɪ/ in unaccented syllables has become established in most English dialects (e.g. in *around* and *remain*), including RP, in Slovene it only occurs in casual, non-standard pronunciation. In addition, Slovene vowels in unaccented syllables are not necessarily weakened to central qualities of the 'schwa' type, and weakening (of short /a, i, u/) occurs also in accented position. Concerning the monophthongisation of diphthongs, we can observe a similar process in English, where triphthongs (rising glides followed by /ə/) tend to become diphthongs or even monophthongs. The process is often referred to as 'smoothing' (e.g. *tire* /tairə/, *tower* /taʊə/ both pronounced as either /tɑ:ə/ or /tɑ:/).

Examples of monophthongisation in the dialect of Ljubljana:

/au→ u/, /au→ ɔu/  *pogledal - pugledu, zaklal - zaklou; /eu→ u/  *tekel - teklu;**

/iu→ u/  *odločil - udloču; /ɔu→ u/  *polnoči - punučī; /ai→ i/, /ai→ i/  *skupaj - skupi, zdaj - zdej, dvajset - dvejst; /ei→ i/  *posebej - pusebi; /ɔi→ ɔ/oi-o s  *seboj - sabo*****

Examples of weakening of monophthongs:

/a→ ɔ/, /a→ ɛ/, /a→ ə/  *lahko - loh, kakor - kokəɾ, jaz-jes(t), seveda - səvede, moram - mɔɾəm; /ɛ→ ə/  *pripravljen - pəpɾɾɐvlən, seveda - səvede; /i→ ə/  *nič - nəč, bik - bək***

/ɔ→ u/, /ɔ→ ə/  *polnoči - punučī, obrnil - ʊbəɾnu, kot - kə, čudno - čudən;*

/o→ ə/  *bolj - bəl; /u→ ə/  *kup - kəp, drugače-dərgač**

Except for the vowel /e:/, which is always accented in Slovene, we can find examples of elision for all Slovene monophthongs, even for /o:/, which also only occurs in accented position. Generally, however, vowels undergo elision in unaccented syllables, preceding or following the primary accent, in the same way as in English. Examples:

/a/  *tako - tko; /ɛ/  *enega - enga, plačeval - plačvou, denar - dnar (gnar), najraje - najraj, ce'lo - clo; /i/  *imaš - maš, proti - prot da bi - da b, začeli - začel, postavili - pustavəl, nikoli - ənkol, pomnožite - punnošte; /o:/  *samo - sam, ti bom - tim; /ɔ/  *dobro - dobəɾ, jasno - jasən, zvijalo - zvijal, kosilo - kusiu; /u/  *blizu - bliz, rumena - əɾmena******

#### 4.3 Elision of whole syllables

While in English generally only one syllable of three- or four-syllable words can be elided, it is not uncommon for Slovene to elide one syllable in dissyllabic words, and up to three syllables in words consisting of four or more syllables. Examples: *izmeriti - zmert; tukajle - tle, kle; ne bom - nəm; malo - mau; skoraj - skor; potlej - pol; šestdeset - šesət; sedemdeset - sensət.*

## 5. CONCLUSION

This brief survey of assimilation and elision in English and (standard and colloquial) Slovene shows that in spite of their strong roots in the sound systems of the two languages, the two aspects of connected speech can nevertheless be contrasted. A number of parallel features can be observed, which - along with equally important differences - can increase our students' (as well as our own) understanding of certain general tendencies, characteristic of connected speech across different languages. In addition, a contrastive approach in this, as well as in many other areas of linguistic research, makes it easier for a non-native speaker of English to understand and acquire features of connected speech in the foreign language by establishing links with their mother tongue, with which they are necessarily more familiar. This, in my view, justifies implementation of a 'contrastive' teaching methodology at all levels of the language learning process.

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## ASIMILACIJA I ELIZIJA U ENGLESKOM I SLOVENSKOM

### SAŽETAK

*Asimilacija i elizija, dva važna svojstva povezanoga govora, uspoređene su u engleskom (RP) i (standardnom i nestandardnom) slovenskom jeziku. Nestandardni izgovor (ljubljski dijalekt) uključen je da bi se usporedio razgovorni stil neformalnog RP izgovora s razgovornim stilom slovenskog nestandardnog izgovora, koji je različit, ovisno o dijalektu. S obzirom na asimilaciju po zvučnosti i po mjestu tvorbe između standardnog i nestandardnog slovenskog izgovora nema većih razlika, a istodobno uključivanje nestandardnog (neformalnog) izgovora čini se bitnim radi kontrastiranja procesa (samoglasničke i suglasničke) elizije u dva jezika.*

*Ova kontrastivna studija pokazuje neke sličnosti između dvaju jezika u istraživanim pitanjima, kao i nekoliko razlika. Razlike se mogu uglavnom pripisati postojećim razlikama između glasovnih sustava engleskog i slovenskog. Posebice, konvergencija se može primijetiti u regresivnoj asimilaciji s obzirom na mjesto tvorbe (primjerice, asimilacija alveolarnih suglasnika) i u eliziji suglasnika (u suglasničkim skupinama), dok se glavne razlike pojavljuju u asimilaciji po zvučnosti okluziva i eliziji/slabljenju samoglasnika.*

*Namjera je rada upozoriti na nužnost kontrastivnog pristupa kako bi se razjasnile neke opće tendencije, svojstvene povezanom govoru u različitim jezicima, kao i da bi se studentima engleskog kao stranog jezika omogućilo razumijevanje i usvajanje procesa elizije i asimilacije u engleskom uspostavljanjem veza s njihovim materinskim jezikom.*

**Ključne riječi:** asimilacija (fonetska), elizija, engleski jezik, slovenski jezik