EPENTHESIS AND ELISION AS MARKERS OF PHONETIC ECONOMY IN SPOKEN ENGLISH

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Abstract. *This article explores two key phonological processes—epenthesis (the insertion of extra sounds) and elision (the omission of sounds)—as mechanisms reflecting phonetic economy in natural spoken English. By analyzing conversational speech data and corpora such as the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) and The British National Corpus (BNC), the study identifies common patterns where these phenomena occur, particularly in casual and fast speech. The article argues that such alternations are not random but serve a functional role in optimizing articulatory effort and maintaining fluency, especially in connected speech contexts. It further examines how factors such as speech rate, stress patterns, and phonotactic constraints trigger these reductions or insertions. Special attention is given to the implications of these processes for second language acquisition, particularly how learners of English often struggle with reduced forms and may hypercorrect or misperceive fast speech.*

__Keywords__: epenthesis, elision, phonetic economy, connected speech, articulation, speech rate, casual speech, second language acquisition.

Introduction. Epenthesis and elision are two central phonological processes that vividly reflect the principle of phonetic economy in spoken English. While epenthesis involves the insertion of an extra segment not found in the word's underlying form, elision refers to the omission of a segment, often under conditions of casual or rapid speech. These phenomena, rather than representing deviation or error, demonstrate the dynamic adaptability of spoken language to articulatory, contextual, and communicative demands. Phonetic economy, a term introduced and developed in phonetic and phonological theory, refers to the natural tendency of speech to reduce articulatory effort while maintaining intelligibility. As Lindblom (1990) explains in his Hyper-Hypo (H\&H) theory, speech production operates on a continuum, from hyper-articulated (clear and careful speech) to hypo-articulated (reduced and casual speech).

This continuum is dictated by the communicative needs of the moment, allowing speakers to modulate clarity and effort. From this theoretical standpoint, both elision and epenthesis can be viewed as strategies that optimize speech fluency and comfort, especially in informal contexts. Elision is perhaps the more prominent of the two in terms of its occurrence in native English speech. It typically involves the omission of a consonant that would otherwise complicate articulation in clusters. For instance, in rapid speech, words such as "friendship" are often pronounced without the /d/ sound, becoming /frɛnʃɪp/. Likewise, phrases like "next day" may be realized as /nek deɪ/, with the /s/ and /t/ dropped due to the influence of the following voiced consonant. Roach (2009) points out that such deletions are systematic and conditioned by phonetic environment, speech rate, and the degree of formality. The function of elision here is not merely to shorten words, but to facilitate smoother transitions between syllables and to maintain a natural rhythm in spoken discourse. Similar observations are made in corpus data. The British National Corpus (2007) shows frequent instances of elision in naturally occurring dialogue, such as "just one" being rendered as /dʒʌs wʌn/ or even /dʒʌ wʌn/, depending on context. Elision is further encouraged by phonotactic constraints, especially in consonant clusters that are either difficult to produce or disfavored in English phonology.

The process is also influenced by speech style; it is considerably more common in informal and conversational contexts than in careful, read speech. Scholars like Crystal (2003) argue that these reductions are not only predictable but also necessary for the rhythm and efficiency of everyday language. In fact, they are so ingrained in native speaker usage that they often go unnoticed, yet they present significant challenges for language learners. Learners unfamiliar with connected speech may struggle to recognize words that are elided in fast speech, perceiving them as entirely different lexical items or failing to comprehend them altogether.

Jenkins (2000) emphasizes the importance of training learners to recognize and interpret these reduced forms, suggesting that awareness and listening practice are critical for developing real-world communicative competence.

Epenthesis, on the other hand, is characterized by the addition of a segment, typically a vowel, in order to break up a difficult consonant cluster or to align the pronunciation of a word with the speaker's native phonotactic rules. While often seen in non-native speech, epenthesis is not exclusive to second-language contexts. In native English varieties, it can occur for dialectal or articulatory reasons. For example, words like "athlete" may be pronounced as /ˈæθəliːt/, with an inserted schwa. Similarly, the phenomenon of intrusive /r/ in certain dialects of British English—where "law and order" becomes /lɔːr ən ɔːdə/—is a type of epenthesis that serves to maintain fluidity between vowel-final and vowel-initial words. Among second-language speakers, epenthesis often reflects an effort to reconcile the phonotactic rules of their first language with those of English. For instance, Uzbek learners may insert a vowel at the beginning of a word such as "school," producing /sɪˈkuːl/ instead of /skuːl/. This is due to the absence of complex onset clusters in Uzbek, where syllables typically follow a CV (consonant-vowel) pattern. Similar patterns have been observed among learners from Japanese or Korean backgrounds, where consonant clusters are also rare or prohibited. Avery and Ehrlich (1992) note that in such cases, epenthesis is a form of phonotactic repair, allowing speakers to produce otherwise inaccessible sound combinations using strategies from their first language phonology.

Although epenthesis involves the addition of a sound, and elision involves the removal of one, both processes ultimately serve the same goal: to facilitate articulation and optimize fluency. They are two sides of the same coin—one adds a segment to ease the transition between sounds, the other removes a segment to simplify articulation. Together, they exemplify how language adapts under real-time conditions to meet communicative needs. In both native and non-native speech, these adaptations are shaped by context, rhythm, and physiological ease.

Corpus-based studies further illustrate how these processes function in authentic speech.

In the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), examples abound of phrases like "give me" being realized as /gɪmi/ or "going to" as /gənə/. These reductions often involve a combination of elision, assimilation, and even epenthesis. For example, "going to eat" might become /gənəʔiːt/, with both elision of /t/ and insertion of a glottal stop. Such patterns are systematic enough to warrant pedagogical focus, especially for learners who are expected to operate effectively in real-time, informal communicative environments. The implications of elision and epenthesis for second language acquisition are significant. Field (2003) argues that one of the primary barriers to listening comprehension among ESL learners is their unfamiliarity with connected speech phenomena, including elision and epenthesis. Learners who are taught English through clearly articulated, dictionary-like models are often unprepared for the reduced forms they encounter in natural conversation. Consequently, they may fail to recognize even common expressions, leading to breakdowns in comprehension and interaction.

Pedagogically, it becomes essential to integrate awareness of phonetic economy into pronunciation instruction. Techniques such as shadowing, where learners repeat audio passages immediately after hearing them, can help them attune to the rhythm and reduction patterns of native speech. Jenkins (2000) also recommends including real-life dialogue samples in the classroom, rather than relying solely on scripted or artificial recordings. These approaches can help learners understand that reduced forms are not errors or sloppiness but legitimate and systematic features of spoken English. Furthermore, learner perception of these phenomena is crucial. Derwing and Munro (2005) report that some learners resist reduced forms, viewing them as substandard or incorrect. This perception can create a cognitive dissonance between what learners are taught and what they encounter in practice. Educators, therefore, need to explicitly discuss these features, providing linguistic justification for their occurrence and helping learners to embrace the diversity and flexibility of spoken English. In conclusion, epenthesis and elision are core features of spoken English that reflect the broader principle of phonetic economy. These processes—while opposite in direction—both aim to simplify speech production, reduce articulatory effort, and maintain communicative efficiency. They are influenced by phonological constraints, speech rate, and sociolinguistic context, and they are observable in both native and non-native speech. For linguists, they provide insight into the mechanics of spoken language; for educators, they highlight the need for realistic and responsive pronunciation teaching.

Understanding these processes allows for a more nuanced view of language, one that respects both its systematic structure and its natural variability.

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