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EXPLORING VOWEL TO VOWEL LINKING PATTERNS IN SPOKEN ENGLISH: A PHONETIC PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The phenomenon of linking in English pronunciation is one of the phonetic aspects that plays an important role in the fluency and naturalness of speech. One common form of linking found in natural conversation is vowel-to-vowel linking, which refers to the connection between a vowel sound at the end of a word and a vowel sound at the beginning of the following word. This study aims to analyze the phonetic characteristics of vowel-to-vowel linking, its patterns of occurrence, and its influence on speaking fluency. The research employs a descriptive qualitative approach by analyzing recorded speech data from English speakers. The data are examined using both segmental and suprasegmental phonetic approaches to identify the types of linking that occur. The results indicate that vowel-to-vowel linking is most frequently realized through the use of the semivowel sounds /j/ and /w/ as bridging elements between vowels. These findings suggest that mastery of linking can enhance speaking fluency and listener comprehension. This study is expected to contribute to the teaching of English pronunciation, particularly in improving learners' connected speech skills.

Keywords: *Linking, Vowel to Vowel, Phonetic Analysis, Pronunciation.*

INTRODUCTION

In the practice of learning English as a foreign language, many learners are able to pronounce vocabulary items individually quite well, but experience difficulties when they have to produce them in sentences or continuous conversation. This phenomenon is often observed when students read texts or perform dialogues, where each word is pronounced in a disconnected and non-fluent manner. As a result, the speech sounds unnatural and is difficult for listeners to

understand (Brown, 2007; Laoubi, 2020). This issue indicates that mastery of pronunciation is not only related to the articulation of individual sounds, but also to how these sounds are connected in real speech.

One of the most common difficulties arises when two consecutive words end and begin with vowel sounds. In such situations, learners tend to insert an overly long pause or add an unnecessary glottal stop. This disrupts the flow of speech and reduces communicative fluency (Walker, 2011). In natural speech produced by native speakers, however, the meeting of two vowels is usually not articulated separately; instead, they are connected through certain phonetic processes to create smoother transitions between sounds (Roach, 2009).

This phenomenon of sound connection in speech is known as connected speech. Connected speech refers to the way linguistic sounds are realized continuously in natural utterances, involving various phonological processes such as linking, assimilation, elision, and weak forms (Crystal, 2008). Among these processes, linking plays a crucial role as it maintains the continuity of speech flow and reduces articulatory breaks between words (Celce-Murcia, 2010).

One of the most prominent forms of linking is vowel-to-vowel linking, which is the process of connecting a vowel sound at the end of a word with a vowel sound at the beginning of the following word. This process is often realized through the emergence of semivowel sounds such as /j/ or /w/, which function as articulatory bridges between vowels. For example, in the phrase I agree, native speakers tend to pronounce it as /aɪ jəgriː/ to avoid a pause between the two vowels. Similarly, in the phrase go on, the /w/ sound frequently appears as a linking element, making the utterance more fluent (Kelly, 2009).

In the context of teaching English as a foreign language, vowel-to-vowel linking often receives limited attention in pronunciation instruction. Learning materials tend to focus more on vocabulary mastery, grammar, and the pronunciation of individual sounds, while aspects of speech fluency and phonetic patterns in connected speech are still insufficiently addressed (Celce-Murcia, 2010). As a result, learners experience a gap between their ability to read or memorize words and their ability to speak naturally in real communication.

Furthermore, differences between the phonological systems of English and learners' first languages also become an obstacle in mastering linking. Many languages exhibit more segmental pronunciation patterns, leading learners to separate sounds between words. When this pattern is transferred into English, the speech becomes less aligned with the rhythm and phonetic characteristics of English, which is stress-timed in nature (Crystal, 2008; Roach, 2009).

Based on these issues, the study of vowel-to-vowel linking is important to understand how this phonetic process works and how it affects speaking fluency. A phonetic analysis of this

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phenomenon not only provides insight into speakers' articulation patterns, but can also serve as a foundation for developing more effective pronunciation teaching strategies.

Therefore, this study focuses on the phonetic analysis of vowel-to-vowel linking in English speech. It aims to identify the forms and patterns of linking that occur, explain their phonetic characteristics, and examine their implications for the teaching of English pronunciation. It is expected that the findings of this study will contribute theoretically to the fields of phonetics and phonology, as well as provide practical contributions to the teaching of English pronunciation in educational settings.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with a focus on phonetic analysis of the phenomenon of vowel-to-vowel linking in English speech. The qualitative approach is selected because the primary objective of the research is to gain an in-depth understanding of the characteristics of speech sounds and the articulatory processes that occur in natural utterances, rather than to examine statistical relationships between variables (Creswell, 2014). By emphasizing detailed description and interpretation, this approach enables a comprehensive exploration of how linking operates in real communicative contexts.

The method used in this research is phonetic analysis, which aims to identify and describe the realization of sounds that emerge in the linking process. The analysis is grounded in both segmental and suprasegmental phonetic principles, encompassing observations of articulatory movements, transitions between sounds, and the rhythm of speech (Roach, 2009). Through this analytical framework, the researcher is able to systematically and scientifically explain how vowel sounds are connected within the flow of connected speech. This method provides a clear representation of the dynamic nature of spoken language, particularly in the way sounds interact across word boundaries.

In addition to phonetic analysis, the study adopts a non-participant observational method. In this approach, the researcher does not take part in the production of speech but instead acts as an observer who analyzes previously recorded speech data. This method ensures that the data remain natural and are not influenced by the researcher's presence or intervention (Jack R. Fraenkel, 2012). As a result, the speech samples reflect authentic language use, which is essential for accurately examining phonetic phenomena such as linking.

The data for this study are derived from two main sources: recordings of conversations produced by native speakers of English and recordings of text readings performed by intermediate-level learners of English. These sources provide a comparative perspective, allowing the researcher

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to observe how vowel-to-vowel linking occurs in both natural native speech and learner speech. The inclusion of these two types of data also helps highlight differences in fluency and pronunciation patterns between the two groups.

Data collection is carried out through observation and audio documentation techniques. The researcher records and carefully selects speech samples that contain potential instances of vowel-to-vowel linking. This selection process ensures that the data analyzed are relevant to the focus of the study and sufficiently representative of the phenomenon under investigation.

The analysis of the data is conducted in several systematic stages. First, the recorded speech is transcribed phonetically using the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) to accurately represent the sounds produced. Second, word pairs that contain vowel-to-vowel contact are identified within the transcriptions. Third, the types of linking that occur are classified based on their phonetic characteristics. Finally, the identified patterns are interpreted to reveal how vowel-to-vowel linking functions within the broader context of connected speech.

Overall, this methodological framework allows the researcher to provide a detailed and structured analysis of vowel-to-vowel linking, offering insights into both its phonetic realization and its role in enhancing speech fluency.

RESULT

The results of the data analysis indicate that the phenomenon of vowel-to-vowel linking occurs consistently in spoken English, both among native speakers and learners of English as a foreign language. The occurrence of this linking is influenced by phonetic context, speech rate, and the speaker's level of fluency. In general, three main patterns were identified in the realization of vowel-to-vowel linking: the use of the semivowel /j/, the use of the semivowel /w/, and direct transitions between vowels without a clear pause.

1. Realization of Linking through the Semivowel /j/

The first and most dominant pattern found is the use of the semivowel /j/ as a connector between two vowels. This pattern mainly occurs when front or high vowels such as /iː/, /ɪ/, /eɪ/, and /aɪ/ appear at the end of a word and are followed by a vowel at the beginning of the next word.

Examples identified in this study include:

I agree → /aɪ jəgriː/

She asked → /ʃiː jɑːskt/

They are → /ðeɪ jɑː/

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In these examples, the /j/ sound appears naturally and unconsciously as an effort to avoid the direct collision of two vowels, which may create an articulatory gap. Observations show that the presence of /j/ facilitates tongue movement from a front vowel position to the following vowel, thus maintaining the flow of speech.

In terms of frequency, this pattern occurs more often in native speakers' speech than in that of learners. Learners tend to insert short pauses or maintain separate pronunciations between words. This indicates that mastery of vowel-to-vowel linking through /j/ correlates with speaking fluency.

2. Realization of Linking through the Semivowel /w/

The second pattern identified is the use of the semivowel /w/ as a connector between vowels. This pattern occurs mainly when back or rounded vowels such as /uː/, /əʊ/, and /ɔː/ appear at the end of a word and are followed by a vowel at the beginning of the next word.

Examples include:

Go on → /gəʊ wɒn/

Do it → /duː wɪt/

Two apples → /tuː wæplz/

In these examples, the /w/ sound functions as an articulatory transition involving lip rounding before moving to the next vowel. The use of /w/ helps maintain the continuity of airflow and prevents unnatural pauses.

Findings also show that /w/ is more frequently used in fast speech and informal conversation. Speakers who speak more slowly tend to reduce the use of this linking sound. This indicates that speech rate significantly influences the occurrence of vowel-to-vowel linking.

3. Direct Transition between Vowels without an Additional Sound

In addition to the use of semivowels /j/ and /w/, this study also found cases of direct transitions between vowels without a clearly identifiable linking sound. This pattern occurs when articulatory positions allow relatively smooth movement without requiring a bridging sound.

Examples include:

The idea of → /ðiaɪdɪə əv/

He is → /hi ɪz/

In these cases, speakers maintain fluency by minimizing pauses without inserting semivowels. Although less prominent than the /j/ and /w/ patterns, this direct transition still contributes to speech continuity.

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However, this pattern occurs less frequently than the previous two, indicating that the use of semivowels is a more dominant phonetic strategy for linking consecutive vowels.

4. Differences in Linking Patterns between Native Speakers and Learners

The findings also reveal significant differences between native speakers and English learners in realizing vowel-to-vowel linking. Native speakers tend to use linking consistently and automatically, while learners show greater variation.

Some learners tend to:

a. Omit linking and insert pauses between words.
b. Use inappropriate glottal stops.
c. Pronounce words separately according to their written forms.

These tendencies suggest that learners are still influenced by the segmental phonological system of their first language. As a result, their speech sounds more rigid and less natural compared to native speakers.

5. The Influence of Linking on Fluency and Naturalness

The analysis also shows that vowel-to-vowel linking has a positive impact on fluency and naturalness in speech. Speech that incorporates linking sounds more fluid, rhythmic, and easier for listeners to understand.

In contrast, speech without linking tends to sound choppy and less aligned with the stress-timed rhythm of English. This demonstrates that vowel-to-vowel linking is not merely a technical phonetic phenomenon but also plays a crucial role in the communicative aspect of language.

6. Frequency Patterns of Linking Occurrence

Based on the data classification, the frequency patterns of vowel-to-vowel linking can be summarized as follows:

The use of /j/ is the most dominant pattern.

The use of /w/ ranks second.

Direct transitions without additional sounds have the lowest frequency.

This order indicates that vowel characteristics and articulatory positions strongly influence the type of linking used by speakers.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that vowel-to-vowel linking is a dominant phonetic phenomenon in natural English speech. This supports the view that speech is not produced as isolated word units, but rather as a continuous stream of connected speech (Jennifer Jenkins, 2000;

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Roach, 2009). Thus, linking functions as a phonetic mechanism that maintains articulatory continuity and fluency in speech production.

1. The Articulatory Function of Semivowels in Linking

The occurrence of semivowels /j/ and /w/ as connectors between vowels can be explained from an articulatory phonetics perspective. The sound /j/ has the characteristics of a high front vowel, closely related to /iː/ and /ɪ/, and therefore naturally appears when there is a transition from a front vowel to another vowel. Similarly, /w/ has the characteristics of a back rounded vowel, closely associated with /uː/ and /əʊ/ (Georgiou & Savva, 2025; Roach, 2009). These findings are consistent with the theory of articulatory economy, which states that speakers tend to choose the most efficient and economical articulatory path in speech production (Zahradníková, 2025). By using semivowels as bridges, speakers can minimize drastic movements of the tongue and lips, thereby maintaining a stable and uninterrupted flow of speech.

In addition, the use of semivowels helps avoid the direct contact of two vowels, which may result in segmental ambiguity or the emergence of unwanted glottal stops. This shows that vowel-to-vowel linking is not only mechanical in nature but also plays a phonological role in maintaining clarity in speech sounds.

2. Linking as a Determinant of Fluency and Speech Rhythm

The study shows that speech containing vowel-to-vowel linking sounds more fluent and natural compared to speech that does not apply linking. This is related to the stress-timed rhythm of English, in which the intervals between stressed syllables are relatively constant, while unstressed syllables are often reduced and connected rapidly (George Yule, 2012; Roach, 2009).

With linking, the flow of speech becomes more rhythmic and aligned with the prosodic patterns of English. In contrast, when speakers separate each word rigidly, the natural rhythm of English is disrupted, resulting in unnatural-sounding speech. This finding supports, who argues that mastery of connected speech is a key factor in improving oral fluency (Kelly, 2009).

Furthermore, vowel-to-vowel linking also enhances intelligibility. Continuous and uninterrupted speech makes it easier for listeners to process information without having to constantly adjust their perception due to unnatural pauses.

3. Differences in Linking Realization between Native Speakers and Learners

One of the key findings of this study is the significant difference between native speakers and English learners in realizing vowel-to-vowel linking. Native speakers use linking automatically and consistently as part of their phonetic habits, whereas learners show greater variation and tend to avoid linking.

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This phenomenon can be explained by the theory of interlanguage phonology, which suggests that learners' phonological systems exist between their first language and the target language (Brown, 2007). Learners often transfer segmental phonological patterns from their first language, which typically do not involve connected speech. As a result, they are more accustomed to pronouncing words separately rather than linking them phonetically.

Pedagogical factors also contribute to this difference. Many pronunciation teaching materials still focus on individual word pronunciation such as vocabulary lists or minimal pairs without sufficient emphasis on pronunciation in sentence and conversational contexts (Celce-Murcia, 2010). This leads to partial phonetic knowledge and limited ability to apply it in real communication.

4. Pedagogical Implications for Pronunciation Teaching

The findings of this study have important implications for English pronunciation teaching. Vowel-to-vowel linking should be taught explicitly as part of connected speech. Pronunciation instruction should not only emphasize segmental accuracy but also include suprasegmental aspects such as rhythm, intonation, and linking (Beddor et al., 2002; Harris & Lindsey, 2000).

English teachers can integrate linking practice through activities such as reading aloud, paired dialogues, and listening exercises based on authentic materials. By providing models of natural speech and repeated production practice, learners can develop phonetic awareness of vowel-to-vowel linking patterns.

Additionally, the use of IPA transcription in teaching can help learners understand the relationship between written forms and phonetic realization in speech. This strategy can enhance phonological awareness and help learners internalize more natural pronunciation patterns.

5. Theoretical Contribution to Phonetic Studies

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to strengthening the understanding of the role of semivowels as transitional elements in the phonetic system of English. The findings support phonetic theories suggesting that word boundaries in spoken language are flexible and may shift depending on articulatory and prosodic needs (Crystal, 2008).

Moreover, the study confirms that vowel-to-vowel linking is not merely a phonetic variation but an integral part of the English phonological system that influences prosodic structure and speech flow. Thus, it broadens our understanding of the relationship between segmental and suprasegmental phonetics in speech production.

6. Limitations of the Study and Directions for Future Research

Although this study provides a comprehensive description of vowel-to-vowel linking, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the speech data analyzed were limited to specific

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conversational contexts. Second, the study did not quantitatively measure the extent to which linking influences speaking fluency.

Therefore, future research is recommended to adopt a mixed-methods approach, incorporating quantitative analysis to measure the frequency of linking occurrences and its impact on listener comprehension. Experimental studies could also be conducted to examine the effectiveness of teaching vowel-to-vowel linking in improving learners' speaking proficiency.

CONCLUSSION

Based on the findings of the study, it can be concluded that vowel-to-vowel linking is an important phonetic phenomenon in English speech. The main patterns identified include the use of the semivowels /j/ and /w/, as well as direct transitions between vowels without a pause. This phenomenon contributes to the fluency, naturalness, and intelligibility of speech.

The implications of this study suggest that English pronunciation teaching should incorporate connected speech, particularly vowel-to-vowel linking, in order to help learners develop more natural and communicative speaking skills.

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