

The Assimilation of ə in Present English

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In rapid English speech, assimilations, dissimilations and elisions take place, most of which are scarcely considered in the textbooks. Evidence for some of them goes back for several centuries. They occur mostly in informal situations and are therefore difficult to observe. Not all individuals make them, but some do regularly; thus although, with few exceptions, they are not obligatory, the student should know of their existence. As we would expect, the phonemes most affected are those occurring frequently and in unstressed position, particularly t, d, n, ð, l, r and ə. It is the behaviour of the last of these that concerns us today.

As a general principle we may say that ə not standing before a pause is assimilated to any neighbouring continuant phoneme. The ə disappears; the continuant is lengthened; if it is a consonant it changes from a margin to a peak; and the onset of the next syllable is transferred to the following phoneme. For instance *get along* $gətə'lɒŋ > gɛtl'vɒŋ$ ¹. The process often coincides with other assimilations, etc., and the resulting syllabics include sounds, such as Φ or γ , which are not generally reckoned as being part of the English sound system. Here are some examples:

- m < vəm: 'nɛvm'·aɪnd *Never mind*
m < *məmpp < mɛntp: wən'məvm·?'plɪz *One moment, please* –
not RP
m < vən: 'hɑ'pɑstl'·'ɛbm *half past eleven*
n < tən: bɑtn· *button*; 'ɑftn'·'un *afternoon*
n < dən < dɪn: kɑdn·l· *cardinal*
n < tʃn·ət < tʃənət: ən'fɒtʃn·n·tʃɪ *unfortunately*
n < aɪən: laɪn· *lion*; /laɪn *line* – Midland, not RP

¹ The high point · indicates that the preceding sound is syllabic.

ŋ	< *səŋgk < səŋdk:	'hɔsŋ·'kat <i>horse and cart</i> (but 'hæ?n·'kəvt <i>hat and coat</i>)
Φ	< səvp:	'lvtʃ·'pipl· <i>lots of people</i>
Φ	< *Φəb:	'wεɪspεɪΦbaskɪt <i>wastepaperbasket</i> Φ < p by dissimilation. Φ not syllabic here
β	< ləvw:	'fʊlβ'wɔtə <i>full of water</i> . l remains clear as if before a vowel
f	< vfəg:	af·'gɒ?n· <i>I've forgotten</i> – said by a child
f	< tɪf:	'bjʊtɪf·l· <i>beautiful</i>
v	< əvət:	kn·'səv·tɪv <i>conservative</i> . Stress on v level not diminishing
θ	< nəθ:	'enθ·ɪŋ <i>anything</i>
ð	< εðə:	wεð·ðə'rentəbbɪmpε:d <i>whether the rent had been paid</i>
ð	< təð:	wɔtð·εgən'duðεə <i>What are they going to do there?</i>
s	< məs:	bətəms·'dʒes <i>But I must just...</i>
s	< vəs:	vs·ɪnətɪ <i>vicinity</i>
s	< sðət:	'wɔtss·'taɪm <i>What's the time?</i>
z	< sðət:	'wɔtssz·'taɪm
z	< məz:	æmz·n· <i>Amazon</i> ; /dæmzn· <i>damson</i>
z	< ðəz:	ðz·ə'mænəvð·'εə <i>There's a man over there</i>
r	< θrəp:	'aθr·pɒd <i>arthropod</i>
r	< rən:	fʊr·nə <i>foreigner</i> . r scarcely syllabic
ɣ	< *χəg < kəg:	'bæχɣ·gen <i>back again</i> ; 'rεχɣ·gnəɪz <i>recognize</i>
l	< pəl:	prɒpl·ɪ <i>properly</i>
l	< dəl:	'bɒdl·aɪn <i>borderline</i>
l	< təl:	'kætl·vɜg <i>catalogue</i>
ɪ	< təhɪ:	tɪ'ɪhɪə <i>to hear</i>
ɪ	< təj:	'mɪstɪ'ʊstəs <i>Mr Eustace</i>
ɪ	< jəl:	a'tɪkjɪlətɪ <i>articulatory</i>
ʊ	< təwəd:	'aftwɒdz <i>afterwards</i> . Here w remains, to keep the distinction, as tɒ'wɪŋk <i>to wink</i> ; tɒ'ɪŋk <i>to ink</i>
*?	< əv:	Does not occur. 1. This ə is of course often stressed. 2. The recent fashion for əv > ə“i”, ε“i” is paralleled by əv > ə“i” and is probably an independent sound-change
ɪə	< ɪə:	fɪə <i>fear</i> – Cockney, not RP
æ:	< εə:	hɪ'læ: <i>Hilaire</i> – said by a child. Perhaps only on a rising or falling tone. Combined with post-war tendency to lower the front vowels

ʒ	< və:	kjə'ɪ-əs <i>curious</i> . Only after velars? 'djʊəriŋ <i>during</i>
a	< əə < aɪə, əvə:	'faəriŋ <i>firing</i> ; 'ʃaabaθ <i>shower-bath</i>

(After plosives and affricates the ə is simply elided. The elision is often marked by release of the voiceless plosives, as 'æpɪtəɪt *appetite*, 'aftɪ'nʌn *afternoon*, and the full voicing of the voiced ones, as nεɪbhʊd *neighbourhood*. In ədʒtənt *adjutant* the effect is very slight.)

Some of these assimilations occur only in rapid speech; but others, for instance n, l, l ('mɛtl·ɪŋ'gwɪstɪks), (tɪ'ju *to you*) and a ('kaərəv *Cairo*), are heard even in formal discourse.

They occur mostly in the posttonic, and the ə most often precedes the assimilating consonant. They also tend not to occur across morpheme boundaries: laə *lyre*/laɪə *liar*. Unfortunately time does not permit us to enquire further into the conditions of occurrence.

It is interesting to note how many places in the system are filled.

In deciding the phonemic status of the syllabics we are at first tempted to treat them as realizations of the sequences əC or Cə. But it is unnatural to analyse a single phone as a phoneme sequence; moreover in some cases the single phone can be contrasted with the sequence: bɪtɪn· *bitten*/bɪtən *bittern*, æpl·ɪ *apply* “apple-like”/æpəlɪ *Apperley*. A possible solution would be to bring in a phoneme of syllabiness [·], like phonemes of length or of juncture. Even in this rapid, informal and you may say slovenly style of speech, the distribution of the syllabics corresponds close enough to that of ə in a more formal style.

These facts also serve to illustrate a general rule, that the faster the speech, the more complicated its phonetic structure.

Owing to typographical difficulties it is not possible to show examples of the syllabic labio-dental and dental voiced nasals, labialised z, retroflex s and z, or unvoiced l. It is noteworthy that there are no examples of the voiceless correlates of the syllabic nasals, ɹ, l, l, v, and labialised z; nor of ʃ and ʒ; nor of χ at the time of going to press.

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