The Assimilation of \( \partial \) 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 \( t, d, n, \delta, l, r \) and \( \partial \). It is the behaviour of the last of these that concerns us today.

As a general principle we may say that \( \partial \) not standing before a pause is assimilated to any neighbouring continuant phoneme. The \( \partial \) 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 gets\'lʊŋ > getl\'-ʊŋ\(^1\). The process often coincides with other assimilations, etc., and the resulting syllabics include sounds, such as \( \partial \) or \( \gamma \), which are not generally reckoned as being part of the English sound system. Here are some examples:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{m} & \text{ < vəm:} & \text{'nevm\-'aimd Never mind} \\
\text{m} & \text{ < *mæmp < mæntp:} & \text{wan\'-mæm\-'pliz One moment, please –} \\
& & \text{not RP} \\
\text{m} & \text{ < vən:} & \text{'ha\'past\-'ebm half past eleven} \\
\text{n} & \text{ < tʰən:} & \text{batn\-'button; 'aftn\-'un afternoon} \\
\text{n} & \text{ < dən < dm:} & \text{kadn\-'l\: cardinal} \\
\text{n} & \text{ < tʃən\-ət < tʃən\-ət:} & \text{an\'-fəsn\-'l\:h unfortunately} \\
\text{n} & \text{ < ān\-ən:} & \text{lain\-\: lion; lain\-'ine – Midland, not RP}
\end{align*}
\]

\(^1\) The high point \( \cdot \) indicates that the preceding sound is syllabic.
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η < *sɔŋk-sɔŋk: 'hɔŋ-ŋat horse and cart
φ < sɔp: ‘lʌv-’pɪl: lots of people
φ < *sɔb: ‘wɛtspɛr-beskt wastepaperbasket Φ < p by dissimilation. Φ not syllabic here
β < həw: ‘hɔl-wa full of water. I remains clear as if before a vowel
f < vəg: af’g7r, I’ve forgotten — said by a child
f < tɛf: ‘bʌf-tl: beautiful
v < vət: kn-‘sv-tn conservative. Stress on v level not diminishing
θ < nəθ: ‘ɛnθ-θ anythng
δ < eθə: wɛd-dærem βæmpt: d whether the rent had been paid
δ < tɛd: wætθ-eθən’duθə What are they going to do there?
s < mas: botams’dyes But I must just... s < vəs: vɔmθ vicinity
s < sɒt: ‘wɔts-’tæm What’s the time?
z < sɒz: ‘wɔtsz-’tæm
z < mæz: ɛmz-n-Amazon; ɛmzn- damson
z < ɒz: ɒz-‘mæznɔv-’ɔο There’s a man over there
r < ʌθəp: ‘ɑfθ-rpd əθropod
r < rən: fo-rθ-foreign. r scarcely syllabic
y < *yɔθ < kag: ‘bɛθ-gθn back again; ‘rɛθ-gθnaz recognize
l < pɔl: prɛpl-i properly
l < dəl: ‘bɔd-am borderline
l < tɔl: ‘keθ-θg catalogue
j < tɔrθ: tʃ’hθσ to hear
j < tæl: a’utjus-tæs Mr Eustace
l < jəl: a’utjus-tæs Mr Eustace
l < jəl: a’utjus-tæs Mr Eustace
v < tɔvɛd: ‘əftɔvɛd afterwards. Here w remains, to keep the distinction, as τɔwŋk to wink; τɔwŋk to ink
*? < ao: kjɔt-θs curious. Only after velars?
djɔrm- during
a < aa < ao: ‘fɑːθ fir; ‘θæbθ shower-bath

(After plosives and affricates the a is simply elided. The elision is often marked by release of the voiceless plosives, as ‘æpθ-tar appette, ‘afθ-tun afternoon, and the full voicing of the voiced ones, as nɔθ-bθd neighbourhood. In edzőnt adjant the effect is very slight.)
Some of these assimilations occur only in rapid speech; but others, for instance n, l, l (‘mɛlt-ŋjɛθusks), (θjju to you) and a (‘kærʊθ Cairo), are heard even in formal discourse.
They occur mostly in the postonic, and the a most often precedes the assimilating consonant. They also tend not to occur across morpheme boundaries: laa θɛθθa 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 aC or Ca.
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: bɪtn- bitten/buθn bittern, æpl-I apply “apple-like”/æpθl Appleby. A possible solution would be to bring in a phoneme of syllabicness [-], 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 a 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, z, l, l, v, and labialised z, nor of j and 3; nor of x at the time of going to press.

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