

MODIFICATION OF PHONEMES. COMPARATIVE PHONETICS. COMPARATIVE PHONOLOGY

Teshaboyeva Nafisa Zubaydulla qizi

*Jizzakh branch of the National University of Uzbekistan named after Mirzo Ulugbek
The Faculty of Psychology, the department of Foreign languages Philology and foreign
languages Scientific advisor: nafisateshaboyeva@gmail.com*

Abdurazzoqova Lobar Ikromjon qizi

Student of group: abdurazzoqovalobar@gmail.com

Annotation: *This article explores the fundamental concepts of the modification of phonemes, comparative phonetics, and comparative phonology. It provides clear definitions, types, mechanisms, and the significance of these concepts in linguistic studies. The work also compares linguistic phenomena across languages, emphasizing English and Uzbek as primary examples.*

Key words: *Modification of phonemes; assimilation; elision; reduction; comparative phonetics; comparative phonology; phonotactics; syllable structure; articulation; connected speech.*

Phonetics and phonology form the core of linguistic sound studies. While phonetics focuses on the physical and articulatory properties of speech sounds, phonology examines how these sounds function within a particular language system. Understanding how phonemes are modified and how languages differ in their phonetic and phonological systems is essential for linguists, teachers, and language learners. This article discusses three major components:

1. Modification of phonemes – how and why sounds change in connected speech.
2. Comparative phonetics – studying the similarities and differences in sound production across languages.
3. Comparative phonology – comparing the sound systems and organizational patterns of languages.

Phoneme modification refers to the changes that speech sounds undergo in connected speech under the influence of neighboring sounds, speech rate, or stylistic factors. These modifications ensure natural, fluent, and easy pronunciation.

Types of phoneme modification:

1. Assimilation

A sound becomes similar to a neighboring sound in one or more features.

By direction: progressive, regressive, reciprocal.

By degree: complete or partial.

By features: manner, place, voicing.

Examples:

in- + possible → impossible (n → m before bilabial /p/)

good boy → /gʊb bɔɪ/ (d → b assimilation)

2. Elision

Elision is the omission (dropping) of a sound (a phoneme) in connected, fast, or casual speech. It helps speech become faster, smoother, and easier to pronounce. Elision happens when a sound that is normally pronounced in isolation is left out in natural speech. Example:

Next please → /neks pli:z/ (the t disappears)

Camera → /kæmrə/ (middle vowel e disappears)

It does not usually happen in careful, formal, or slow speech. It does not happen in isolation or dictionary form. For example:

You say "ca-me-ra" clearly when pronouncing slowly for someone learning English.

3. Reduction

Vowels become weaker or shorter, often turning into /ə/ or disappearing completely.

Can I... → /kən aɪ/

Some of them → /sʌməv ðəm/

Comparative phonetics studies how speech sounds are produced and articulated across different languages, focusing on physical, phonetic differences rather than theoretical systems. It helps identify sound similarities and differences, improve pronunciation teaching, predict difficulties for language learners, assist in translation, and support linguistic research. In articulatory terms, it examines how sounds are physically produced, including tongue position, lip shape, voicing, and manner of articulation.

Acoustically, it studies vowel formants, sound duration, pitch, and intensity. Auditory comparative phonetics focuses on how speakers perceive sounds, which may differ across languages. For example, English has around 20 vowel sounds (12 monophthongs, 8 diphthongs) while Uzbek has 6 stable vowels. English includes consonants such as /θ, ð, v, ŋ/ which are absent in Uzbek, whereas Uzbek includes /q, ɣ/ which are absent in English.

English is stress-timed with irregular stress, while Uzbek is syllable-timed with mostly final stress. English intonation uses rising, falling, and mixed tones, while Uzbek intonation is flatter and more regular. English allows complex consonant clusters, while Uzbek prefers simpler structures and often adapts borrowed words with additional vowels.

Comparative phonetics is important for classifying languages, understanding historical sound changes, identifying universal versus unique patterns, improving learner pronunciation, and helping teachers design effective pronunciation training.

Comparative phonology studies how languages organize and use their phonemes within their sound systems. It focuses on patterns, structures, and rules that govern sounds, rather than their physical production. For example, English and Uzbek differ in

syllable structure, stress, phonotactic rules, and phonological processes. English allows complex consonant clusters such as /str/ or /spl/, whereas Uzbek prefers simpler syllable structures like CV or CVC and often adapts borrowed words with additional vowels. English stress patterns are irregular and stress-timed, while Uzbek is syllable-timed with mostly final stress. Phonological processes such as assimilation, reduction, and elision occur in both languages but manifest differently due to structural differences. Comparative phonology is essential for understanding how languages differ in their sound organization, predicting pronunciation challenges for learners, aiding in language teaching, and supporting research in linguistic typology and historical linguistics.

Phonotactics is the branch of phonology that studies rules and restrictions on how sounds can be combined in a language. It determines which consonant and vowel sequences are allowed in syllables and words. These rules differ from language to language, influencing pronunciation, word formation, and fluency. For example:

English allows complex clusters like /str/ in street or /spl/ in splash.

Uzbek prefers simpler structures such as CV (consonant + vowel) or CVC (consonant + vowel + consonant). Borrowed words often get adapted with additional vowels to fit these rules. Phonotactic rules also affect stress, syllable formation, and pronunciation. Understanding them is important for language learners, linguists, and speech recognition technologies.

Connected speech refers to the natural, continuous flow of spoken language in which words are not pronounced in isolation but are linked together in a smooth, rhythmic stream. In real communication, speakers rarely articulate every sound fully or separately. Instead, sounds influence each other, merge, weaken, or even disappear altogether in order to maintain fluency and reduce articulatory effort. This phenomenon is central to the study of phonetics and plays a significant role in distinguishing careful speech from spontaneous, everyday conversation. In English, connected speech is especially prominent because the language relies heavily on stress timing, vowel reduction, and consonant linking.

As a result, the pronunciation of individual words often changes significantly when they appear in natural speech. For instance, forms like “want to” becoming wanna, “going to” becoming gonna, or “did you” sounding like didzu are not random contractions but predictable phonetic processes that occur when words combine in fast, fluent speech.

These transformations allow the speaker to maintain rhythm while avoiding excessive articulatory effort. Connected speech also arises from the interaction between vowels and consonants at word boundaries. English speakers tend to link similar or compatible sounds together, creating new transitions that make speech sound smooth.

A phrase such as “go on” is typically pronounced as gowon, while “see it” may sound like si:jt. These phonetic adjustments ensure that the speech stream remains

continuous and uninterrupted. Furthermore, when consonants meet across word boundaries, assimilation often takes place, causing a sound to partially or fully adopt the features of a neighboring sound. As a result, everyday spoken English differs considerably from its written form. The importance of connected speech goes beyond phonetic description; it has practical implications for language learning and teaching. Learners who understand the mechanisms of connected speech are better equipped to comprehend natural spoken English, which often sounds fast or unclear due to these reductions and linking processes. Mastery of connected speech also leads to more natural and native-like pronunciation, improved listening comprehension, and greater communicative efficiency. Additionally, connected speech analysis contributes to linguistic research, speech technology, and the development of accurate speech-recognition systems.

Syllable structure, articulation, and connected speech are essential aspects of phonetics and phonology. Syllable structure refers to the organization of sounds within a syllable, typically including onset, nucleus, and coda. Languages differ in their permissible syllable patterns; English allows complex clusters while Uzbek prefers simpler structures such as CV or CVC. Articulation involves the physical production of speech sounds using the tongue, lips, vocal cords, and other speech organs. Proper articulation ensures clarity and intelligibility in speech.

In connected speech, sounds influence each other due to speed, rhythm, and fluency, leading to processes such as assimilation, elision, reduction, linking, and intrusion. These interactions make spoken language smooth and natural, reflecting both phonetic and phonological rules of the language. Understanding syllable structure, articulation, and connected speech is crucial for linguists, language teachers, and learners to improve pronunciation, comprehension, and overall communication skills.

In conclusion, the study of phoneme modification, comparative phonetics, and comparative phonology provides a comprehensive understanding of how sounds are produced, modified, and organized in different languages. By analyzing processes such as assimilation, elision, reduction, and linking, linguists can understand natural speech patterns and connected speech.

Comparative phonetics allows for a detailed examination of articulatory, acoustic, and auditory differences between languages, helping identify pronunciation challenges and improve language teaching methods.

Comparative phonology highlights structural differences in syllable patterns, stress, and phonotactic rules, demonstrating how languages organize their sound systems uniquely.

Understanding syllable structure, articulation, and connected speech is crucial for accurate pronunciation and effective communication. Overall, these studies contribute to linguistic research, language learning, and teaching, enhancing comprehension, communication skills, and cross-linguistic knowledge.

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