

## **The Phenomenon of the English Schwa ( Neutral Vowel / ə /)**

The paper deals with multifunctional use of the English neutral vowel - schwa. Here three main points will be discussed.

Initially, we will speak about the phonological status of the neutral vowel. Secondly, we will introduce our point of view about rejecting the idea about existence of syllabic sonorants in English. Thirdly, we will concentrate on the role the neutral vowel plays in creating the English rhythm.

We believe, the new findings made by us will enrich the theory of syllable and the theory about considering the English language rhythmical.

**I.** It is natural that neutral vowel /ə/ is introduced in the chart of the English vowel system. It is one of the vowels among the English twenty vowel sounds.

**Vowel Phonemes**

|   |   |    |   |    |    |    |
|---|---|----|---|----|----|----|
| ɪ | ɪ | ʊ  | ɸ | lɔ | ɔl | ⊗  |
| ɛ | ɔ | e: | ɒ | ʊɔ | oɪ | qʊ |
| ɤ | ʌ | ɹ  | ɹ | ɛɔ | al | aʊ |

It is noteworthy, that unlike all other vowel phonemes in English, it is difficult to pronounce the neutral vowel /ə/ in isolation. As a rule, we meet /ə/ only in unstressed positions. Any vowel in unstressed position may become a neutral vowel /ə/.

e.g.

e – burden/ 'bɔ;ɔɹn/

a-about /ə 'baʊt/

o – poison / 'pɔɪzɔɹn/

ɪ – basin / 'beɪsɔɹn/

u – autumn / 'ɒ tɔɹm/

ɪo-nation / 'nɛɪʃɔɹn /

ai - certain / 's ɔ;ɔɹn/

ɪo - passion / 'pɤʃɔɹn/

ɪa – politician / 'pɔli 'tɪʃɔɹn/

ɪa - Asia / 'eɪʒɔ /

ɪa – Persia / 'p ɔ;ʃɔ/

In spite of the peculiarities of neutral vowel it has its phonological status, since it can form a minimal pair, and thus can differentiate the meaning of words.

- |  |                                   |
|--|-----------------------------------|
| 1.scary /'skeəri / - საშიში            | scarer /'skeərɪ / - შემამინებელი  |
| 2.codling /'kɒdliŋ / - წვრილი ვირთევზა | coddling /'kɒdliŋ / - მოვლა       |
| 3.lightning /'laɪtnɪŋ / - ელვა         | lightening /'laɪtnɪŋ / - განათება |
| 4.brighty /'braɪti / - კაშკაშა         | brighter /'braɪtɚ / - უფრო ნათელი |
| 5.Betty /'beti / - ბეთი (სახელი)       | better /'betɚ / - უკეთ            |
| 6. neaty /'ni:ti / - მოწესრიგებული     | knitter /'nɪtɚ / - მქსოველი       |
| 7. feeder /'fi: dɪ / - მიძოდებელი      | feedy /'fi:di / - მკვებავი        |
| 8. stretcher /'strɛtʃɚ / - საკაცე      | stretchy /'strɛtʃi / - წელვადი    |

II. As it is known, English sonorants m, n, l, r are considered to be syllabic. That means as if they are able to form syllables.

The existence of neutral / ɹ / vowel in English puts under the question the widespread theory of syllabic sonorants |m|, |n|, |l|, |r| in English. In the two-syllable words like: ‘cotton, button, blossom, handsome, ho'rizɒn, mɛtəl, mɒdɪl, better, matter’ the second syllables are unstressed and naturally the vowels are neutralized, transformed into neutral vowel / ɹ /. In such cases it is the neutral vowel that forms the second syllable and not the sonorous consonants.

Now, let’s look at other examples where we have no vowels in the second syllable but we might hear a neutral vowel while pronouncing these words separately, in isolation: ‘battle, settle, marble, double, pickle, tickle, middle, candle, drizzle, apple, couldn’t, wasn’t, nestle, whistle, prism’ and others. The appearance of a neutral vowel before a sonorant consonant can be explained in a simple way if we use the principle of sound distribution in syllables based on decreasing sonority.

According to the theory of sonority, the center or nucleus of a syllable is always a vowel phoneme and the distribution of consonants on both sides of vowels are based on the principle of decreasing sonority.

Let us look at the pairs:

belt and battle, bulb and bubble, silk and circle, drills and drizzle, built and beetle, meals and measles, land and London, mint and mitten, dreams and prism, pulse and parcel, dance and person, pens and prison, pink and darken, think and thicken and etc.

As you see, in the first words of the pairs the principle of the sound distribution in the syllable is observed: after the nucleus of the syllable (vowel) the sounds are arranged according the rule of decreasing sonority. But in the second words of the pairs that rule is violated, which naturally causes insertion of a neutral vowel between the last consonant sounds, like: bɛtɪl, bʌbɪl, sɪk, dɪzɪl, mɪ:zɪl, lɒndən, mɪtɪn, prɪzəm, pʊ:zəl, dɪŋk and ɛtɪ.

There is one more argument to prove our opinion. It is a well-known fact that the language strives for making oral speech easier and more comfortable. The most active and flexible organ of speech- our tongue is inclined to find ways of pronouncing the utterance easier. For instance the words ‘belt’ and ‘drills’ are pronounced easier than the words ‘battle’ or ‘drizzle’. And the tongue inserts a neutral vowel between the last consonant sounds which definitely simplifies the pronunciation. That is not the only case of the tendency to make our pronunciation easier. What can be said about other sound changes like assimilation, coalescence, deletion, insertion and etc. Do not they make our oral speech easier and more comfortable?! We should admit - they do.

We believe that there are no grounds to speak in favour of syllabic sonorants in English when there is a neutral vowel with its own phonological status In English.

### III.English is a stress-timed language which makes English a rhythmic, musical language.

English oral discourse is definitely specific in regards to rhythm. We believe, that is due to the existence of neutral (schwa) vowel in English. The schwa vowel is really a unique phenomenon. And due to the existence of schwa the English language is a stressed time language and accordingly so rhythmical, so musical.

The English connected speech is divided into rhythmic groups and the division is based on alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables where unstressed syllables are attached to the stressed syllables thus forming a rhythmic group. Each rhythmic unit is pronounced in equal time. A lot of phonetic changes take place in connected speech, among them is compression of unstressed syllables and their linking to the stressed syllables which is essential for keeping the rhythm.

The unity of oral text is based on two categories: connectedness and sequence of regular repeated pattern of sounds. Nowadays a lot of scientists take interest in the phenomenon of connected speech in English. It is out of the question, that English connected speech is distinguished from other languages and it undoubtedly has become the subject of special research.

We have to emphasize once again one of the peculiarities of oral English speech. This is the phenomenon of existing schwa (neutral vowel ə) in English. Nearly all multi-syllable words have neutral vowels. For example, in the following words-conference /'kɒnfərəns/, dangerous /'deɪŋdʒərəs/, comfortable /'kɒmfərtəbl/ first syllables have full vowel sounds because they bear a stress but the vowels in the second and the third syllables are in unstressed position, so, they are introduced by a neutral vowel. We can conclude that neutralization of vowels takes place in unstressed positions, which means weakening and transforming the full vowels into schwa. It should be mentioned that, as a rule, all vowels in English have a tendency to become schwa in unstressed positions. Even more, in fast connected speech there is full compression.

Here are some more examples: 'beɪsn, t'nait, 'ku:ʃn, 'pɜ:snɔl, 'Cɒklɔt, 'dɪfrənt, 'ɪntrəsti:ʃ, 'veɪtəblz, tɔ'mɔrəʊ, prɒps, kɔ'leksən, 'hɪstri, 'fraɪtnɪʃ. In these words all the vowels in unstressed position undergo weakening, reducing or neutralization and they transform into neutral /ə/ vowel or it totally disappears.

As it is known, there is no correlation between English spelling and pronunciation. In written and spoken English, we have spaces between words. For example, "What is her name?" "Do you know?" But in oral speech, we are given a stream of sounds, where the boundaries between sounds are not sharply defined, and the intervals between words have disappeared. /wɒtsneɪm/, /ɛnəʊ/. Within a sense group, the words are linked together and often it is perceived as one long word. That is why in many cases it is difficult to distinguish the end of one word and the beginning of the next word.

Let's take such examples:

1. I'll ask a cup of tea. 'alaskə'kʌpət J
2. I miss you / ɔ'mɪʃu:;
3. What do you want to do? /'wɒɟju 'wɑnədu:;
4. I saw a good girl. /'aɪsɔrɔ 'gʊdɜ:l /
5. Where do they go? /'wɛrdʒi 'gəʊ/
6. We must leave now. / wɪməs 'lɪv 'naʊ/

It is very important that in English only words with lexical meaning, i.e. words that convey information, bear a stress and auxiliary words or words with grammatical function, like: articles, conjunctions, prepositions, particles, some pronouns, auxiliary, link and modal verbs and others (the number of such words in the English language is up to 50, are unstressed and are attached to stressed syllables, and together with them form rhythmic units.

Thus, the rhythm characteristic of the English language inevitably implies division of the text into rhythmic (tonal) groups and that division is based on the principle of distribution of stressed and unstressed syllables, according to which unstressed syllables stick to stressed syllables and create rhythmic units. These rhythmic units are pronounced in the same time period. Several words can be combined in one rhythmic unit and only one word - in another rhythmic unit. In both, there is only one stressed syllable and the pronunciation time of both rhythmic units is equal. The more unstressed syllables, the faster they are pronounced. Stressed syllables occur at approximately equal intervals of time. Word compression/shortening, sound deletion, coalescence, sound insertion are phonetic processes characteristic of rapid oral discourse. It is not our purpose to discuss them at present. In English, rhythm is a result of the relationship between stress and time, maintaining the same interval between stressed syllables.

We believe, the existence of neutral vowel in English has not been fully valued by linguists. Our attempt has been to show multi functions of neutral vowel which enabled us to apply a new approach to some linguistic phenomena.

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