

# **Keeping up with Native Speaker Speed: An Investigation of Reduced Forms and Deletions in Informal Spoken English**

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In *Studies in Comparative Culture*, No. 25: 72-79

## **Introduction**

Foreign learners who have learned some English and can understand their teachers and course tapes often still have difficulties following spoken English outside the classroom. Their teachers and course tapes all too often have presented the learners with carefully enunciated English spoken with ideal pronunciation. When faced with listening to native speakers outside the classroom, foreign learners find that sounds are distorted, juxtaposed, or lost altogether. Those learners with little experience of listening to native speakers, but who have had a certain amount of experience of reading and writing, frequently fail to connect the sound they hear with the words they have seen and recognized in printed form. The whole experience can be confusing and discouraging (Underwood, 1989).

An example of this confusion can be seen in the question, "What do you think that you are going to have to say to them?" If the question is spoken slowly or written down, the foreign learner might have little trouble in understanding it. However, when spoken at natural speed--as in *Whaddaya think that cher gonna hafta say da 'em?*--the question often becomes an incomprehensible stream of sounds.

Gillian Brown (1990) calls this the "acoustic blur" of natural spoken English. The foreign learner, in order to keep up with the speed of informal spoken English, needs to be able to distinguish where word boundaries lie within the stream of sounds, and what segments of the acoustic blur carry the most information.

This paper looks at two features that characterize a large portion of informal spoken English: deletions and reduced forms. First, a definition of top-down and bottom-up processing is given, followed by a listing of seven important conversational listening micro-skills connected with bottom-up processing. Next, an examination is made of what reduced forms are, how stress and nonstress play a role in their formation, what criteria are used for deleting redundant elements in certain sentence types, and what pedagogical implications can be drawn for helping learners improve their bottom-up processing skills. The paper concludes by stating that helping learners recognize deletions and reduced forms should be an integral part of English classes focusing on listening comprehension.

## **Top-Down and Bottom-Up Processing**

Linguists generally agree that there are two distinct, but complementary processes involved in processing information when we listen to spoken language: (1) top-down and (2) bottom-up. Top-down processing refers to using background knowledge or previous knowledge of the situation, context, and topic to interpret meaning. In other words, using previous knowledge and experience to anticipate, predict, and infer meaning. Native speakers obviously have a cultural advantage in this regard. Bottom-up processing refers to decoding the sounds of a language into words, clauses, and sentences, and using one's knowledge of grammatical or syntactic rules to interpret the meaning of an utterance.

The problem for foreign learners often lies at the phonetic level of bottom-up processing. Even if they manage to develop a strong set of predictions, they still need to monitor the sounds they hear in order to know which predictions are being confirmed and which are not. The cues and hints at the phonetic level provide the raw data of language input. Without this data there is no linguistic message (G. Brown, 1990).

### **Conversational Listening Micro-Skills**

Jack Richards (1983) provides a taxonomy of 33 skills involved in conversational listening, 19 of which can be classified as belonging to bottom-up processing. Given the time constraints teachers and learners face in the classroom, seven of these 19 bottom-up micro-skills have important pedagogical significance:

1. ability to discriminate among the distinctive sounds of the target language
2. ability to recognize the stress patterns of words
3. ability to recognize the functions of stress and intonation to signal the information structure of utterances
4. ability to identify words in stressed and unstressed positions
5. ability to recognize reduced forms of words
6. ability to distinguish word boundaries
7. ability to recognize elliptical forms of grammatical units and sentences

All seven of these micro-skills are directly related for foreign learners' weaknesses in recognizing common reduced forms and deletions.

### **Reduced Forms, Stress, and Unstress**

James Dean Brown and Ann Hilferty (1986) use the term "reduced forms" to refer collectively to the processes of contraction, elision, assimilation, and reduction.

The most common contractions in English involve the auxiliary verbs "be," "have," "will," and "would." Some examples are "I'm," "he's," "we're," "she's been," "they've gone," "I'll," and "he'd." Foreign learners often have had some exposure to the contractions, but still have difficulty recognizing them in a stream of native speakers' speech.

Elision is the dropping out of a consonant or vowel, usually at the end of a syllable. The most common consonants that occur in elision are /t/ and /d/. For example, "a thousand people" often becomes *a thousan' people* and "last week" becomes *las' week*.

Assimilation refers to adjacent or nearby consonants blending or changing to resemble each other, as in "did you" becoming *did ju* and "nice shot" becoming *ni' (s)shot*.

Reduction is the dropping of strong vowels when a syllable is given weak stress, as in "you know" becoming *ya know* and "I can go" becoming *I kin go*.

Stress and nonstress (or weak stress) play a major role in the formation of reduced forms. All languages have their own characteristic rhythm. The rhythm of English is based on the contrast of stressed and unstressed syllables (G. Brown, 1990).

All English words have stress patterns that are stable when the words are pronounced in isolation. When words are combined in utterances, however, not all words are stressed. G. Brown (1990: 53) states that in cases where "contrastive stress" (i.e., when certain words are stressed to contradict some previous remark) is not involved, "nearly all grammatical words will lose their stress when they are combined to form an utterance, whereas nearly all lexical words will keep their stress." Grammatical words are the words that show the relations between the parts of an utterance--the prepositions, conjunctions, pronouns, and articles. Lexical words are the words that carry the meaning of the utterance--nouns, main verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. The function of stress is to mark the information-bearing words in an utterance.

## Deletions

Sentences spoken in informal English also occur frequently in elliptical forms, with the deletion of such elements as subjects, auxiliaries, verbs, articles, and pronouns when context makes them redundant (Richards, 1983).

Akmajian et al. (1984) claim there are two central features that mark deletions in informal English: (1) the subject of the sentence can be dropped and (2) the auxiliary verb can be dropped. The deletions occur most frequently in three different sentence types: (1) tag-controlled deletion, (2) abbreviated questions, and (3) deletion in declarative sentences. Tag-controlled deletions and abbreviated questions are of prime importance to foreign learners because in both cases the learners are obligated to give some response.

In a sentence with a tag question such as "You have been drinking again, haven't you?" the rules for tag-controlled deletion, as summarized by Akmajian et al. (1984: 302), are:

Given a sentence with a tag question, the subject of the main sentence may be deleted under the following conditions:

- a. the subject must be identical with the pronoun in the tag, and
- b. if the main sentence contains an auxiliary, it must be contracted onto the subject if it can be contracted on the subject

This means that since the auxiliary "have" can be contracted onto the subject "you" (e.g., "you've") in the sentence mentioned above, both the subject and the auxiliary can be deleted, as in "Been drinking again, haven't you?" However, when the auxiliary is negative (i.e., "You haven't"), it cannot be contracted to *you'ven't* as this form does not exist in English. For a sequence such as *you have not been*, either the subject and auxiliary can be contracted, as in *you've not been*, or the auxiliary and the negative can be contracted, as in *you haven't been*, but both subject and negative auxiliary cannot be contracted. Therefore, negative auxiliaries, unlike positive auxiliaries, can remain behind if the subject is deleted. The contrast in the following two sentences provides an example of this rule:

- a. "Haven't been drinking again, have you?" is possible, whereas
- b. "Have been drinking again, haven't you?" is not possible.

According to Akmajian et al. (1984: 314), "formation of abbreviated questions involves reference to a small, highly specific set of elements: the subject *you* and the contractible forms of *do*, *have*, and *be*." For example, in the questions "Do you want some coffee?"

""Have you seen Bill lately?" and "Are you going downtown?" the deletion of the auxiliaries and the subject "you" produce the abbreviated questions:

1. Want some coffee?
2. Seen Bill lately?
3. Going downtown?

Akmajian, et al. (1984: 307) summarize the formation of abbreviated questions with the following two rules:

1. To form an abbreviated question, the auxiliary verb can be deleted, or else it can be contracted onto the subject *you*.
2. In forming an abbreviated question, the second person subject *you* can be deleted as long as an auxiliary verb is contracted onto it.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

Foreign students of English should not be expected to bring the same strategies as native speakers do to any listening event. Without an adequate grasp of how to decode a stream of sound into segments of words, phrases, and sentences, it is impossible for learners to bring into play such strategies as inferring, predicting, and using knowledge of the topic, speakers, and context to understand a speaker's message.

Despite the fact that foreign learners may already know a lot of vocabulary and grammar rules, it does not mean that they are familiar with each item of knowledge. Recognition of known words and expressions is often linked to foreign learners' knowledge of what the words look like on paper and how they sound when spoken slowly. When listening to informal speech and having to deal with reduced forms and deletions, learners may simply not recognize familiar vocabulary, or they miss its existence entirely (Ur, 1984).

This is particularly true for foreign learners whose native languages (e.g., Japanese) normally do not have strong and weak stress patterns. Learners need to be guided to recognize common reduced forms and deletions rapidly and accurately enough to make intelligent guesses about the content of what they hear. There are several ways to do this.

1. Pointing out common reduced forms and deletions, and the changes that occur in informal spoken English. For example, showing that "What do you" and "What are you" often become *Whaddaya*, "going to + verb" becomes *gonna + verb*, "want to" becomes *wanna*, etc.
2. Modeling with ideal pronunciation sentences and questions in their full forms, then again the same sentences and questions with reduced forms and deletions. For example, first modeling the slow pronunciation of "What are you going to do tonight?" followed by the faster pronunciation of *Whaddaya gonna do tonight?*
3. Giving dictations of the same sentences and questions. This should be done with fast, relaxed pronunciation. Students hear the reduced forms, but write the sentences and questions in their full forms. For example, students hear *Whaddaya gonna do tonight?* but write, "What are you going to do tonight?"
4. Giving cloze exercises, deleting reduced forms the students have studied. The students listen to a tape and fill in the full forms of the reduced forms they hear. The

teacher plays the tape three times: once straight through, once stopping after each line to allow time to write, and once more straight through.

5. Stress recognition exercises. For example, students listen to a list of sentences and mark whether the stress is on when an event occurred or where it occurred.
6. Assigning listening journals as homework. Students are told to listen to a variety of materials and keep a journal marking what new vocabulary they learned, what reduced forms they recognized, brief summaries of the material, etc. The teacher should give a list of guidelines to students to help them with their entries.
7. Interaction with the students. This means using reduced forms and deletions in personal questions to which the students must respond.

## **Conclusion**

Learning to comprehend spoken English is a complex task involving many variables. Foreign learners have to first attend to what they hear, then process it, understand it, interpret it, evaluate it, and respond to it. The features of informal spoken English presented in this paper--namely, reduced forms and deletions--constitute only a small portion of the overall picture. However, without the ability to distinguish word boundaries within a stream of sounds, recognize the stressed syllables and words that carry the most important information, and retrieve the ellipted information in informal speech, foreign learners cannot possibly use context and top-down strategies to achieve comprehension.

Helping learners recognize reduced forms should be an integral part of English classes focusing on listening comprehension, particularly for lower-level students. Weinstein (1985: 81) says that reduced forms "constitute one of the most neglected areas of listening comprehension."

In the final analysis, if our students are to improve their listening skills it is their own responsibility to listen to as much English as possible and engage native speakers in conversations whenever they can. It is the responsibility of teachers, however, to provide the proper guidance and short cuts the students need to know in order to develop specific listening strategies for keeping up with and understanding informal English.

## **Note**

This article is a revised version of the paper I read at the conference for the Kyushu Chapter of The Japan Association of Comparative Culture, held at Fukuoka Women's Junior College on November 13, 1993.

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